

GIRL ON THE

S U B W A Y

crad kilodney

Girl On the Subway

And Other Stories

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By Crad Kilodney

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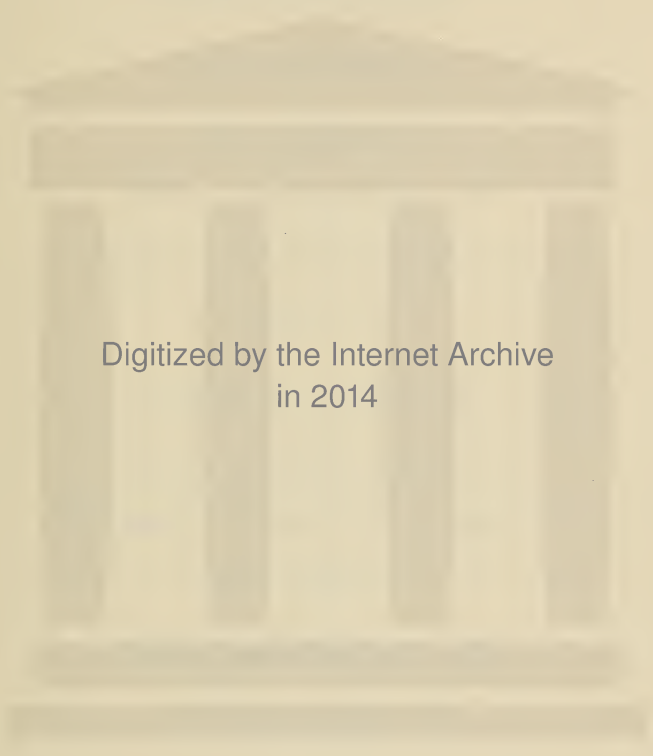
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Table of Contents

Girl on the Subway 9

Three Dead Men 19

The Funeral of Lenny Zeller 27

"Don't You Know Who This Is?" 47

Henry 57

No Chekhov At Yorkdale 59

A Moment of Silence for Man Ray 65

The Simplified Existence of Mr. Duggins 71

Rainy Night 95

Wooden Sticks With Points 103

My Work As A Hole 107

Girl on the Subway

I asked Ted to meet me at Danny's Grill at 8 o'clock and sit with me for a while before Laura arrived at 9. I was pretty sure that this would be the last time I'd be seeing her. I knew she was very unhappy with me, and I expected that she was going to make the break-up official tonight. I'd tried not to see it for a long time, but the warmth was no longer there. It's all those little things that set the tone — the look in the eyes, the body language, the inflection of the voice. When I compared them now to what they were at the beginning, it was hard to believe I was dealing with the same person. I've always been kind of stupid about these things. My heart prevents my mind from reading the signals until they're palpable enough to trip over. Of course, it was remotely possible that Laura was going to be gentle and conciliatory and that she'd say we should keep things going. It was a faint hope, that's all.

I wanted Ted to sit with me beforehand and help me build up my courage because facing a break-up was something I never was able to do bravely. I wouldn't have asked anyone else to do this favor for me. Ted was the only man I ever bared my soul to. In fact, I think he was the only man who'd ever seen me cry in my entire life. And I'd seen him at his worst, too.

I was in a booth toward the back, and he instinctively looked for me there. It was very cold out — well below freezing — and he had on his heavy coat, which he'd bought at Goodwill for \$8.

"Hi," he said, slipping into the seat opposite me. The waitress came by, and I let him order a double whiskey, on me. It was the least he had coming to him for having to sit with me under these circumstances.

He let out a deep sigh and looked at me with that slightly twisted smile of his that conveyed a variety of meanings but which in this case was intended to be sympathetic. "Have you thought of what you're going to say to her?"

"Not really. I figure she'll do the talking, and whatever I have to say won't matter much. Her mind will probably be made up."

"Just don't make a scene. That's the worst thing."

"No, of course I won't."

"Well..." he sighed again, reaching for an inside pocket and pulling out a small envelope — the kind suited for a thank-you note or an invitation. "I got this today."

"From your brother?"

"No, my sister-in-law. Arlen is no longer speaking to me."

"Oh, Christ."

Ted unfolded the handwritten letter. It was written on stiff, rose-colored paper that crackled. "I won't bother reading the whole thing to you, but this part sums it up: *"How could you hurt your brother in that way? We're both very, very disappointed in you..."* See that? The *very's* are underlined for emphasis." The waitress brought him his drink, and he immediately took a large swallow. I decided to have another myself.

Ted had written a story about himself and his brother, and his brother had taken it in the worst possible way. I understood better than anyone else how badly this hurt Ted. His worst moments were the ones when he got drunk and talked to me about his relationship with his brother, and then so much pain would come out that I could only sit there quietly and let him talk himself out. Arlen was four years older. He was a very successful lawyer. His wife, Sarah, was an art dealer. They had a huge house in the suburbs. I'd been up there once. Sarah had seemed nice enough. Arlen I couldn't really size up. He had a polished formality that made me feel I was seeing a carefully constructed image rather than a flesh and blood human being. But Ted had assured me, "That's just the style that carries over from his work. When he loosens up he's a good egg."

Ted was, in his own words, “just one of those typical starving writers,” and he usually said this with his twisted smile and a forced laugh for the benefit of others. But in his case the term “starving” was not so far from the truth. He was always broke. He refused to take any permanent or “career” job because he insisted on being a writer first and a worker second. He would do unskilled labor on a temporary basis — the sort of thing where you show up at the agency at 7 a.m. and wait around hoping to get something. He made a few dollars from his writing now and then, but that was only enough to cover his supplies and postage. I’d treated him to meals plenty of times. I was happy to do it. He couldn’t bear to ask his brother for money. Not that Arlen wouldn’t have given it to him. He would have. But he would’ve done it so condescendingly as to make Ted feel like a failure or a child. Arlen had already given Ted such an inferiority complex that he felt ill at ease among prosperous or successful people.

I considered Ted a brilliant writer, much too good to ever be commercially successful. His devotion to his writing was the thing that kept him going. He cared about it more than anything or anyone else, and he would become very angry if anyone suggested that he “write to sell.” I recall one occasion when we were introduced to an editor for a big publishing house, and this fellow said to Ted, “Why don’t you write something that’ll make you some fast money so you can sit back and write your more literary stuff?” And Ted looked this guy in the eye and said, “Why don’t you have your daughter turn a few tricks to earn money for her wedding?”

One time Ted dragged a cardboard box out of his closet and showed me some old photos of himself and his brother when they were kids. Typically, they had their arms around each other as they stood smiling for the camera. “That’s me and Arlen at the beach.” “That’s me and Arlen with a fish we caught.” “That’s me and Arlen just before he went away to camp.” “That’s me and Arlen with our mother a few months before she died.” Arlen was the stronger, the faster, the more aggressive. Arlen could wrestle him to the ground in five seconds. Arlen was the popular one in school. Arlen got a scholarship. Never did I hear a bad word about Arlen. But no matter how much Ted looked up to Arlen, there was a gap between them. And as the years went by, the gap widened. It wasn’t that Arlen didn’t like Ted. He just couldn’t or wouldn’t show it. They could sit together in a restaurant or bar

and talk, but the talk never got very personal. Arlen's tone was friendly enough, but there was not much feeling in his conversation, and he preferred small talk or talk about his work or the house. When Ted told him they ought to "sit down and get to know each other again," Arlen snickered and said that was a lot of "sixties hippie bullshit." Because of distance, they saw each other only on major holidays or special occasions, and this made Ted feel the lack of communication even more keenly. Arlen also took no great interest in Ted's writing. He wasn't against it, but he never displayed any enthusiasm for it either. His standard remark to Ted was, "When're you going to write a best-seller?" And he once introduced Ted to a friend of his as "my kid brother, Ted, who's trying to be a writer." At that point, Ted had already been writing seriously for 15 years and had published stories in nearly 40 magazines.

I think inside of each person there is one fundamental problem or conflict or theme that underlies everything else and sets the tone of the whole personality, and until you realize what it is, you don't really understand that person. On one occasion when he was pretty drunk, Ted told me tearfully that he loved and admired his brother from the bottom of his heart and that all he ever wanted was to have his brother love and admire him in return, and that it hurt him more than he could express in words that his brother would not open up to him and show him any real affection.

Ted admitted to me that perhaps the main reason why he was so dedicated to his writing was so that someday he might become recognized enough to make his brother take him seriously and admire him and want to understand all that was inside him.

Which brings us back to the letter he'd just gotten from Sarah.

Six months before, Ted had written a story called "Brothers," a thinly-disguised story about his relationship with Arlen. He even set it in the same restaurant where they had sat for dinner and reproduced part of their conversation. It was a very beautiful but very painful story. Its meaning was obvious to me: there was an unbridgeable gap between the narrator and his older brother, and the narrator was suffering silently because of it. The story had gotten published recently in a literary magazine, and Ted had sent a copy to Arlen.

But what he never anticipated was that Arlen would misconstrue it as a personal attack on him — all the worse for having been published “for everyone to read.” And Sarah had agreed with Arlen that it was a cruel personal attack.

Ted folded the letter up and stuck it back in his pocket. He frowned and looked off vaguely into space. I just shook my head and stared into my drink. Then he gave a cynical little laugh and said, “Hell, I didn’t even make any money from that story!”

I was tempted to say that Arlen was an asshole, but instead I told him, “The only guarantee a writer has is that he’ll be misunderstood frequently, and sometimes by the people who ought to understand him best.”

“That’s for damn sure,” he said, finishing his drink.

“You want another? I have plenty of dough today. We might as well, seeing as how we’re both feeling so terrific.” So I ordered another round for us and tried to convince myself that when 9 o’clock rolled around and Laura arrived, I’d be anaesthetized enough to have my head cut off neatly and take it like a man.

“Well, now that I’ve cheered you up,” said Ted with a twisted smile, “why don’t you tell me something amusing?”

And then I thought of the girl on the subway. “Well, it’s not very amusing, but....”

“That’s okay. I want to hear it anyway.”

The waitress brought us our drinks. I waited till she left before I began.

A few nights before, I was on the subway coming home from Laura’s. It was quite late, maybe one in the morning. There weren’t too many people on the subway. There were two girls across the aisle from me sitting perpendicular to each other rather than on the same seat. They were in their early twenties. One was a mannish blonde with short hair, no make-up, and very plain clothes. The other girl was dark, maybe East Indian or from somewhere in the Caribbean. She was quite pretty — nice make-up, colorful clothes, a lovely smile. She seemed a bit coy. She did most of the talking, however, and the blonde girl was leaning forward to hear her better above the noise of the train. I could see the blonde looking at her very intensely, her eyes travelling all over the colored girl. The colored girl made only occasional eye contact with her. Most of the time she smiled bashfully and looked at her hands on her lap or at the floor. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but I got the impression that they knew each

other but not particularly well — maybe as co-workers or classmates. I watched them discreetly all the way up from Bloor Street to Lawrence Avenue. At Lawrence the colored girl got off. She smiled and said goodbye to the blonde and then hurried off, walking briskly toward the exit without looking back.

After that, the blonde's expression changed radically. She just stared at the floor, her hands folded. She looked profoundly sad, and I felt great pity just seeing her sitting there lost in an apparent cloud of inner pain. In that moment, I felt I understood the whole scene intuitively: the blonde girl was in love with the colored girl but couldn't tell her so because the other girl was obviously straight. Perhaps she'd been trying to get up her courage to say something before the colored girl got to her stop but then realized she'd missed her chance. Maybe I was completely wrong in my interpretation of the scene, but my intuitive feeling about it was very strong.

I kept watching the blonde girl out of the corner of my eye. Her gaze wandered to the window, where the wall of the tunnel was rushing past, and I could see her faint reflection in the glass. What a look of sorrow! How I wanted to go over to her and try to console her in some way. But one doesn't do things like that on the subway. Like most people, I'm conditioned to mind my own business.

I had to get off at York Mills, the next stop, and I saw the blonde girl get up, too. I deliberately went out by a different door and then walked toward the north end of the station, in the direction of the stairs leading to the bus platform.

When I cast a quick glance over my shoulder, I saw the girl standing at the south end at the edge of the platform. She was looking at the tracks. I became alarmed. In a few seconds we'd be the only two people on the platform. She was obviously thinking about jumping, and it was up to me to do something.

I pretended to go up the stairs and then walked out of her view behind one of the pillars. I was shaking. I walked back in her direction, using the pillars to keep out of her sight. When I finally came close to her, she saw me and stiffened. I went over to her and put my hand on her arm. "I'm sorry to intrude," I said. Wasn't that a ridiculous thing to say! *I'm sorry to intrude*. Jesus!

"Get lost," she said, pulling her arm away.

This time I held on to her arm more firmly. "Look, I'm not prepared to see something like this. Why don't you come with me?"

"It's none of your business," she said harshly.

"I know, I know, but please, why don't we just go upstairs, okay? Come on. Please. What do you say?"

She gave me a long, hard look I couldn't interpret, then she turned toward the escalator at the south end, and I followed right behind her, trying to hold gently on to one arm.

"Maybe you'd like someone to talk to? We could go somewhere or I could escort you home. Whatever you want." I was still shaking and felt unsure of what to do.

"Never mind," she said, not looking at me. "You don't have to hold my arm. I don't need that." I felt like an idiot.

We ended up at the south exit, south of the Shell station. I had no idea where to steer her. We were on the wrong side to get on a bus. We just walked south on Yonge Street.

"I sort of got the impression that something went wrong between you and that other girl," I said. She was walking at a steady pace. I don't think she was trying to get rid of me exactly, just ignoring me. It was a very cold night, but I felt flushed and uncomfortably warm. She wouldn't say a word. I kept trying to soothe her, to get her to talk. Did she want to go home? Did she want to come home with me? Did she want to sit down someplace and have a drink? (There was no place to sit down in that area anyway.) Did she want to talk about her problem? Part of me wanted to kiss her out of sympathy, and another part of me felt resentful and foolish because of her coldness.

Right in the middle of my pathetic monologue, she spied a cab coming toward us and signalled. "I think I'll just grab this cab," she said. "Thanks. I know you meant well." And without another word, she got in, and they made a U-turn and headed back south.

I walked home. It was a long walk, and I felt very mixed up inside. I felt ridiculous, but I kept telling myself that at least I had prevented a suicide.

After hearing all this, Ted sat back and replied, "Maybe, maybe not. Maybe she went and did it anyway or still plans to. You'll never know."

"Well, I haven't read anything in the papers about a suicide on the subway."

"You wouldn't in any case. The transit commission has a strict policy of never acknowledging them. They feel the publicity would only encourage it."

"I didn't know that."

"It's true. I know somebody who works for them. There's an average of one suicide or attempted suicide per week on the subway. Nobody ever reads about them in the papers." He let out a deep breath. "Anyway, you did the right thing."

The waitress came back. "Care for another?"

"No, thanks," said Ted.

"I'm still waiting for someone," I said. She left us.

Ted looked at his watch. "She ought to be here pretty soon."

"Maybe she'll make me wait. She's done that a few times." Despite all the alcohol, all my courage had melted away again.

"No, she'll be on time," said Ted. "She'll want to get it over with."

I said nothing.

"I know this isn't any consolation to you, but I saw this coming a long time ago. Laura's just not right for you. I'm not putting her down, mind you, but I think she's just not a good match for you."

"We had a terrific relationship for a while."

Ted shrugged and made a face. "In a relationship you see what you want to see. You think, oh, this is the big one, this is real love, this is the one I was destined to meet, and all that crap. And then when it's over you realize how wrong you were, but you repeat the process with the next one. It's all very banal, very banal."

"I'm trying to figure out just what I did wrong."

"Look, now that I'm a little drunk, I'll tell you what I think about human relationships. All our best efforts to reach out to someone aren't necessarily enough. You think you can win the other person over or break down the barriers, or whatever, just because of what *you* feel inside *you*, but you can't transplant your feelings into another person. Every person is locked into his own reality. In fact, I think very few people really understand each other. They connect in some limited way, maybe even for the long term, and they just become habitual to each other if they're compatible. I don't know, maybe it's inevitable. Maybe it's even preferable. Maybe too much communication and openness is

threatening to people. It seems to be enough for most of the human race to just muddle along unthinkingly....Not that this applies to you. You're certainly more open and honest than almost anybody else I've ever known....Anyway, that's Psychology 101 *à la* Ted Butler. Tuition fee, two drinks." He held up his glass for emphasis. "Cheaper than university."

I twiddled my melting ice cube with the stick and picked at the lemon wedge. "Ted, this is going to hurt me like hell. And there's nothing I can do about it, absolutely nothing."

"It's only pain, my friend. It won't kill you." He sighed. "I'm sorry if I sound so hard-nosed, but you know, I've been through so many break-ups, it's positively banal. *All* break-ups are banal. Every man in your situation thinks his particular case is unique or especially tragic, or that his pain is worse than the next guy's. But all it adds up to is this: first you love her, then you have problems with her, you break up, and you go back to being a poor masturbating son of a bitch."

"You know....I always had this thought whenever I had to go through it...that there must be some *meaning* to this kind of pain. There must be something to *understand*. And if I could just understand it, I'd be a lot wiser and maybe avoid it next time."

"You want to know the meaning? I'll tell you."

"What?"

"There *is* no meaning. You just suffer. Period." He looked at his watch again. "I'd better let you face her alone. If you feel like calling me later, I'll be up late." He put on his coat. "Thanks for the drinks."

"Sure thing."

He patted me on the shoulder and left.

I felt alone and miserable. But then I thought maybe, just maybe, we were both wrong, and it was all going to turn out okay. Then I'd be calling him up and telling him, and he'd be happy for me. Anyway, I told myself I was going to be very calm because Fate is kinder to a gentleman. And then I thought about the girl on the subway standing at the edge of the platform. I replayed the whole incident over in my mind, changing what I would've said and done, trying to figure out what the perfect thing would have been to say or do to ensure that the girl wouldn't commit suicide. I had done the only thing I could think of at that moment, but maybe it wasn't enough.

I looked at my watch. It was 9:01. Laura was at the door, dressed in her expensive black coat and looking as sleek as a fashion model. As she opened the door, I saw the look of cool reserve — of *firmness* — on her face, and I knew at once that this was the end. The glass door swinging closed behind her caught the reflection of the neon sign of the night club across the street, such an icy blue crackling mercilessly through the cold winter air, and my heart fell back to the stained glass ornament that hung in her bedroom window — a white bird poised between a rainbow and a garden of flowers — which I'd gazed at so many times as it caught the warm rays of the early morning sun and cast a soft patch of colored light on the edge of the white blanket under which we had slept.

Three Dead Men

The second job I had in Canada was at M. Company, from August of 1974 until June or July of 1975. In that short period of time, three employees died.

I worked upstairs in the stock room most of the time. We picked the orders and sent them down by elevator or conveyor belt to be packed and shipped. In truth, I shouldn't have been in the stock room at all because I was a salesman, but since I had started the job in the summer, it was deemed appropriate to stick me upstairs to get to learn the stock before I hit the road in the fall with the other salesmen. As it turned out, I also worked in the stock room between sales trips because there was nothing else for me to do. The other salesmen didn't have to. Supposedly, they had clients to look after. Everybody got so used to the idea of my being up there that once when they had a sales meeting, they forgot to invite me. All the salesmen sat through the meeting, and not one of them reminded Bill M., the sales manager, that I was upstairs and should be called down. Bill only thought of it at the end.

The stock room at M. Company was one of the worst places I ever worked in. All stock rooms and warehouses are miserable places to work, unless you happen to have the awareness of an amoeba. That job paralyzed me creatively. I don't think I did any writing of value while I worked there.

I got so conditioned to being an unskilled laborer, wearing work clothes and sitting with the stock room staff in the upstairs lunch room, that I often forgot I was a salesman. I got up, sat down, and took my breaks according to the bells. If they'd given me a time card and insisted I punch it like all the other peons, I probably would have. I believe I was the only employee with a university degree, with the possible exception of the guy who ran the computer and a girl in the office who didn't stay with us very long. Certainly none of the other salesmen had a degree. And it's possible that at my probationary salary I was the lowest-paid salesman in the trade in the entire province.

I was generally liked in the stock room, but I was not well-liked in the office. The other salesmen never invited me to lunch, except on one occasion when I think Bill told them to. I was the odd man out. If I had died suddenly, I don't think there would have been any great feeling of sadness. There would have been a lot of remarks like, "He sure was a character, that guy."

As I remember, Manny, who worked in the shipping room, was the first of the three men to die while I was there. Manny was an old Portuguese guy whom the other shippers teased in good-natured fashion because he was a bit of a blockhead. But he was liked by all because he was completely inoffensive. He had the "old country" work ethic. He was always there. He never took days off, and I don't think he was ever sick.

News of Manny's death came to us via the grapevine — namely, Jim, the assistant stock room supervisor. Jim was the son of the man who looked after the computer. Jim came into the stock room and told us Manny had choked to death at breakfast. Something had gotten lodged in his windpipe, and he coughed so hard he ruptured his lung. The official version was different, however. When the President of the company, Doug M., spoke to us over the p.a. system, he announced reverently that Manny had died quietly, quickly, and without pain that morning. He pronounced Manny's last name as "Gonzalez," although it was Gonsalves. We were in the lunch room at the time, and I said, "It's Gonsalves, not Gonzalez! The guy worked here all these years, and D.J. can't even pronounce his name right!" Doug, known as "D.J." behind his back, also tried to console us by saying, "Be of good cheer. The King is dead. Long live the King," which struck me as inappropriate. I always took that phrase to mean that the *old* King is dead, and long live the *new* King. And Manny may

have been a swell, old gent, but a king, no. D.J. pretended to care more about the guys in the shipping room than any of his other employees, but he spent all his time in his office with the door locked (admittance by buzzer). I remember that one guy in the shipping room quit after D.J. told him he wasn't supposed to come in through the front door. But I really believe D.J. loved guys like Manny because he could play the role of the superior WASP giving employment to docile foreigners. One of Manny's co-workers was slightly palsied, and I learned later that he worked for minimum wage or close to it because D.J. knew he could never find another job elsewhere. I, myself, was working for about \$110 or \$115 a week to start. I had left a job paying \$170 a week in the U.S. to come to Canada.

Bill M., the sales manager, was the second man to die. He was Doug's brother, although I'm not sure who was older. I believe Doug may have been a bit older, although Bill certainly looked older in his last days. Bill's son, John, who was one of the salesmen, hated my guts from the first day we met. I don't know why. John was a very handsome guy. He had what my mother used to call the Ivy League look. But John had only a high school diploma. He always made my intuitive antennae vibrate. I felt that he had some deep, dark secret, but I never found out what it was and thought it best not to ask.

Bill M. was the one who hired me. I was the first new salesman at M. Company in many years. I was given the least important territories in Ontario. Bill said to me, "We're going to send you where you'll do the least harm in case you're really bad." He wasn't joking either. None of the M. family had any sense of humor.

I had actually met Bill at my previous job. I'd been working for a lunatic who ran T. Company, and he had made appointments with all the sales managers in the trade to come in so he could distribute their merchandise as a wholesaler. This meant negotiating an impossibly large discount. I can remember Bill sitting in a shabby chair in our office with no windows in a house that should have been condemned and trying to remain polite in the face of a proposition that was obviously unworkable. My lunatic boss was out at the time, probably draining unrecorded money from the Dairy Queen he owned in Windsor, and I was left to try to put T. Company's best foot forward. Bill's voice was raspy even then. He had cancer, and I believe he had already had an

operation on his neck. He was quite thin, too. A year later, when he was my boss, he looked about the same, but the rumor was that he knew he didn't have long to live. At a trade convention, he remarked that it would likely be his last convention.

I can't say that I either liked or disliked Bill. He wasn't an easy man to get to know, and he had no particular reason to cultivate a relationship with a new salesman whom he rarely saw. Bill was just keeping busy because it was what he'd always done. I wondered why a terminally ill person didn't just stay home and take it easy. I couldn't see the point of his continuing as sales manager. But since it was a family business, I guess the sense of duty prevailed over everything else.

Bill's impending death was presaged by two signs. The first was at our Christmas party. We had pre-packaged dinners from Kentucky Fried Chicken, and I helped pass them out. I offered Bill one, but he said he wasn't hungry. And the week before his death he had a little accident with his car. John was angry with him because he really wasn't fit to drive. I think the accident occurred when he was parking.

Jim was the first to bring us the news in the stock room. I had actually gotten in late that day. When he told me Bill had died, I was shocked. And I immediately felt sorry for John, even though I didn't like him.

We all worked a half day that day, until noon. Then we went to the funeral chapel for Bill's funeral. Since I had a car, I took a few co-workers as passengers. Connie, the receptionist, sat in the front with me and also sat next to me in the chapel. I had a crush on Connie, but nothing ever came of it. She was separated and was trying to meet the rent and support a baby on an inadequate salary. I often took her to lunch. She liked me, but she told me she wasn't looking for a relationship. She said, "I've already seen too much" or "I've done too much too soon," or words to that effect. She was in retrenchment, one might say. Connie had had a year or two of university in Ottawa, so she was not like the airheads in the office. I once wrote her a long letter (about a dozen pages) from a hotel on one of my sales trips, and she said it made her cry and I mustn't ever write to her that way again. The letter included a 64-line poem I knew by heart.

Bill's funeral was only the second funeral I'd ever been to in my life. The first was the funeral of my great uncle, whom I didn't really know and had only met once. He and my grandfa-

ther had had a falling out, although I never learned why. Somewhere I may have cousins I will probably never meet. I felt extremely uncomfortable at my great uncle's funeral. My grandfather cried, and I shook his hand because everyone else did and I assumed I was supposed to. He scarcely noticed. The coffin was open, and my father stroked Uncle Christ's hair, although I don't think it was out of love so much as to show he wasn't afraid of a dead body. I found the whole ceremony to be tasteless. Christians are taught that the essence of a person is in the soul, not the body, yet the dead body is clothed elegantly and put in an expensive box, and people pay their respects to it and cry over it as if it were the whole person.

Bill's casket was closed, much to my relief. The minister gave an oration that I cannot remember at all. It was, no doubt, predictable in its platitudes. I can remember thinking that only at a moment like this do people stop to think about life and death, but the effect wears off pretty quickly, and people go back to their boring jobs, their petty thoughts, and their little self-constructed cages. Suddenly, the minister led us in the Lord's Prayer, and I was a little embarrassed because I didn't know all the words. In my family's church it was never recited in English. But enough of it came back to me so that I could fake my way through it. Everyone else seemed to know the words. Nobody cried at the funeral. John sat next to a young woman. I didn't know who she was, but I thought she might have been his ex-wife or ex-fiancee. It was my understanding that John wasn't married. I was very conscious of Connie sitting next to me and must have been thinking about her as much as anything else, but I don't remember what.

After the funeral, we all went to Bill's house for the reception. It was somewhere in the Mount Pleasant district, I believe. I extended my condolences to his widow, and she smiled and told me to help myself to a drink. Inside, you wouldn't have known it was a funeral reception. People were in reasonably good spirits, talking and drinking. I guess the Protestants don't believe in making a display of their grief, or perhaps the family had been prepared for Bill's death for a long time. I told John that if I could take any of his work load off his shoulders, I'd be glad to help. He thanked me, and for the first time I felt there was no enmity between us.

John never asked me for any help. In fact, nothing at all changed at work for me. To the surprise of a lot of people,

however, Doug did not appoint John to take his father's place as sales manager. Bill's assistant, Tim, got the job, and John became Tim's assistant. This was a bad move on Doug's part because some time later John quit and went to work for another company. It was a good move for John because M. Company eventually went out of business.

The third man to die was an old bachelor named Frank, who was 64, one year short of retirement. Frank worked in the office and looked after customer service. I understood that he had come to work for M. Company as a teenager. Frank was liked by everyone, especially the girls in the order department. Helen, for instance, who had nothing but snarky remarks for me, used to visit Frank in his little apartment on top of the greasy spoon on King St. where he lived alone. I don't think he had any friends outside of the company.

Frank would hobble across the street between his apartment and M. Company, and it was obvious to everyone that he was declining physically. I don't know what was wrong with him specifically, but it was understood that he was deteriorating. Frank's intention was to work until age 65, then retire, but Doug apparently didn't think Frank would last that long, and after Manny's death and Bill's death, Doug didn't want yet another death in the company in such a short span of time. So Doug decided to retire Frank early, against his will. What he decided to do was to plan a surprise party for him on the day of his retirement. There was no danger of Frank getting wind of this because he was too simple-minded.

The surprise party was to be held on a Friday at the Northern Club on Bay St., of which Doug was a member. The Northern Club was one of those vestiges of a stylish past when respectable WASPs belonged to a private club. I guess plenty of them still do. I don't think the Northern Club exists any more because when I was selling books on Bay St. one summer, I noticed some movers emptying the place out.

Anyway, about half the company was invited to this surprise party, including the salesmen. We were all to be seated ahead of time, and Doug would come in last with Frank, who understood only that Doug was treating him to a nice private dinner, and then the lights would go on, and everyone would yell, "Surprise!"

Dear, old Frank was completely surprised, and it was a delight for him and for us. We all had a fine dinner, although Frank had difficulty with the extremely tender roast beef. Then came the presentation of the gifts, including a stereo tape player. This seemed like a strange gift for a sick 64-year-old man.

Doug was unusually sanguine on this occasion, unlike his usual mean, crusty self. He even complimented me, saying I could probably sell books to eskimos, or something like that. And he made a point of proclaiming his special fondness for Frank. He said that of all the people who had ever worked for the company, Frank was the one person whose job had always been 100% secure. This prompted me to say, "I wonder what he's got on you!" There was some nervous laughter. It may have been the only time anyone had made a public statement like that to Doug and gotten away with it. Doug grunted and made some mildly ironic reply like "Nice guy!"

But all went according to plan. Frank seemed to appreciate the love we were showing him. "I don't want to go, but they say I've got to," he said wistfully.

That was Friday afternoon. On Monday morning, I walked into the stock room, and Jim said, "Did you hear? Frank died over the weekend." I felt pity for Frank, but it was not an entirely gracious pity. It was more like contempt. I thought, *You dumb son of a bitch. That job was your whole life, and when you left, you had nothing left to live for.* And to me, Frank's death seemed the least satisfactory of the three because it revealed the weakness and shallowness of his life. I wondered if anyone else would see it that way. I believe I made some comment to the guys in the stock room, and perhaps they understood my point of view. I hated M. Company with a passion after only a few months, and here was a damned fool who couldn't live a day without it.

I left M. Company not long after Frank's death. I had gotten so fed up with Doug's meanness and the oppressive atmosphere of the stock room that I engineered what was, in effect, my firing by lodging a complaint with the Ministry of Labour over some minor violation I had tolerated all those months but now decided to make an issue of. Doug called me into his office, rebuked me at length, and made it clear that I had no future in the company or elsewhere in the trade either. Legally, he couldn't fire me, but I took the obvious next step and quit.

In the journals I have kept for many years, there is virtually no mention of my job at M. Company except retrospectively, long after the fact, and even then not much. I have dug out the journal — or what passes for a journal — that I was keeping at the time, and I see that I made no mention of any of the three deaths, or much else about the company for that matter. I was so unhappy there that I hadn't the energy or will to write about it. What the journal does show is an earlier self I'd prefer to forget, and one which the world will never know about during my lifetime. When I look at those pages, I don't like what I see at all. That old self is mostly dead, but a little part of it remains in the new self. The old and the new have come to terms with each other and have agreed at last to set all this down for you.

The Funeral of Lenny Zeller

I had never met Lenny Zeller, the kid who fell off a motorcycle and got killed, and whatever I thought of him was based on what my friend Doug told me. I only met his father, Dr. Marvin Zeller, briefly, and it's mainly Doug's view of him I'm presenting as well.

Even if all the things Doug related to me about the two of them were the whole truth, I'm still not 100% sure that the prank we pulled on the day of the funeral was justified. You'll have to judge that for yourself. I can understand why Doug did what he did: he wanted revenge. I helped him mostly out of friendship. Viewed in its most favorable light, the prank amounted to an arcane joke that nobody got except for Doug and me, which I guess made the event something of an anticlimax. But the motivation behind it is what makes this story worth telling. It involves Doug, Marvin, and a certain 15-year-old girl. Lenny actually doesn't figure into it very much, so you can forget about him for the moment. As for me, I was only slightly involved as an accessory, but, all things considered, I'm probably the best one to tell the story. And now that Doug has taken early retirement and no longer works for the school district, it's safe to do so.

Lenny's death coincided with my visit with Doug in March of 1980. I was there for a week, partly for a vacation and partly as a guest writer in his two classes, for which I got paid.

At the time, Doug was running the creative writing program at a special high school, which I'll call the Benton School of Fine Arts, located in a city in the southern part of the U.S. Benton was devoted exclusively to the arts, including such things as painting, sculpture, photography, film studies, music, dance, theatre, and creative writing. It was a tough school to get into. The students came from all over the city. They would spend half the day at their regular school and the other half of the day at Benton.

Doug personally auditioned students wanting to get into his writing classes, and he deliberately kept the classes small. His morning class that term, which he called his "junior" class, had only eight kids, and his "senior" class in the afternoon had twelve. I found all his kids to be very nice, and they seemed serious about their work. Doug himself was extremely serious about his job. He probably did more preparation than the average college professor. Although the writing program was one of the smaller programs at Benton, it was very good for Benton's prestige because every year Doug's students carried off several of the top prizes in the National Youth Writing Competition, which covered the whole country.

The best writing by Doug's students appeared in a literary magazine they produced twice a year, and it was better than a lot of college magazines. The poetry and fiction he was coaxing out of his students were phenomenal. "I don't care whether they decide to become writers or not," Doug said to me. "I just want to help them get to the point where they can see what's inside them and what they're capable of so they can make a choice." To me, this attitude is the mark of a real teacher.

Like all the other teachers at Benton, Doug was pretty much left alone to run his program. Dr. Marvin Zeller, the Principal of Benton, had very little background in the fine arts himself and, in Doug's words, had "all the taste of a Greyhound bus station toilet." He was one of those career bureaucrats in a big school system, a competent administrator who knew a lot of people, knew how to promote Benton in the eyes of the public and the press, and — most important — knew how to get his budget approved every year. Zeller had only one direct involvement in Doug's writing program: he had authority over the contents of the student magazine. In other words, he had the power of censorship.

As I said before, I only met Zeller briefly — once in the main office, where Doug and I filled out a form so I could get paid for my visit to his classes, and the second time the day of Lenny's funeral. I was in Doug's classes on a Thursday and Friday. Lenny got himself killed on Thursday, and so Marvin Zeller was absent the next day, and we didn't see him again until the funeral on Sunday.

But the seed of Doug's act of revenge was sown long before my visit — in the fall of 1978, to be precise. It concerned a 15-year-old girl named Cassandra Reynolds, who had enrolled in Doug's junior class that term as a new student. I have her picture in front of me now, in fact, in Benton's annual "yearbook." (It's really just a promotional booklet done as a public relations piece and to satisfy the students and parents. No one actually gets a diploma from Benton; they get their diplomas from their regular high school.) Cassandra Reynolds appears as a frail but beautiful blonde with long hair and large, sad eyes. Almost all of Doug's students wore serious, sensitive expressions for the yearbook — maybe because they thought that was the way writers were supposed to look — but Cassandra's expression had a subtle difference. It was as if she had a secret — a secret that was leaking slowly out of her eyes but would not pass through her lips.

Doug admitted to me that he had been infatuated with her. Now, it was not unusual for Doug to have strong feelings for his students because he was a very intense guy who regarded emotion as the fuel of the artist, and he always tried to penetrate his students' defences and get to their gut feelings. He could read a story out loud with tears in his eyes or throw a book across the room in a show of rage. In his private conferences he had to be everything from a surrogate father to a drill sergeant. As he put it to me, "When you're trying to deal with the ego of a teenager who wants to write, you have to do a perpetual balancing act between gentle encouragement and the shock treatment." But everything that came out of Doug was genuine, so it's no surprise to me that he got such outstanding writing out of his students or that his relationships with them became unusually personal.

Doug was very careful, however, not to go too far with any of the girls. As he told me, "I fall in love with one of my girls every year. It's inevitable. Of course, I can't act on it." Although this might sound like just a simple case of fantasy, I think Doug's feelings must have run pretty deep for any girl he was attracted

to because he was such a serious guy. And I believe he suffered a bit for having to suppress or sublimate a feeling of love on account of his position as a teacher.

More often it works the other way: the student develops a crush on the teacher. And it was obvious to Doug that Cassandra was in love with him, too. Her poetry became increasingly romantic and personal as the term progressed, and he also sensed her feelings intuitively. "She knew that *I* knew she loved me," Doug said, "and I'm certain she understood that I loved her but that we couldn't do anything about it. You can believe me when I say that we were tuned into each other perfectly." I believed him.

Toward the end of the fall term, the students began assembling their best work for their magazine, *Nova*. It was customary for each student to have at least one piece of writing in the magazine. At her own request, Cassandra was to have just one poem in that issue. Doug showed me her original typed copy. He took it out of a locked drawer as if it were a precious object—which it was—and handed it to me as we sat in his living room, surrounded by shelves of books, sipping Scotch and water and smoking cigarettes.

I won't say that Cassandra's poem was a great one by the standards of an accomplished poet, but for the work of a 15-year-old, it was exquisite. It was vivid and romantic without being mawkish. It was nothing less than her declaration of love to Doug, who, of course, was the unnamed "you" in the poem. What she was saying, in effect, was that if she could feel his prick inside of her (and she used the word "prick"), it would be the fact that outweighed all other facts, the fact that outweighed death, the fact that would make her live, just as God had shaped a living universe out of a void of death and formed a living being out of dead earth.

What made this poem all the more poignant was something that Doug didn't know at the time: Cassandra Reynolds had leukemia and was going to die.

Doug explained to me what happened next: "So I get all the text and the artwork put together for *Nova*, and I take the folder to Marv Zeller and tell him, 'This is our winter issue, and I'd appreciate it if you could deliver it to the printer as soon as possible because we're about a week late with it.' Now, Marv Zeller had never censored the magazine before, and bear in mind that I was giving a lot of prestige to Benton with the work my kids

were doing and all the awards they were winning, so I practically shit a brick when he called me into his office the next morning and told me, 'You can't print this poem because it has the word "prick" in it.' And I say to him, 'Are you kidding me, Marv? This is 1978.' And Marv says, 'It doesn't matter. This magazine falls into a lot of hands. It gets read by parents, by members of the school board, and even people on the newspapers. What'll I do if someone reads the word "prick" in a poem written by a 15-year-old girl?' And I say to him, 'Gee whiz, Marv, what *will* you do?' And he can tell by the way I'm looking at him that I think he's a horse's ass. And Marv says, 'You could save the school a lot of potential trouble by just substituting a more polite word.' And I got a little hot at that point and said, 'That's Cassie's poem, and nobody has a right to change it. She wrote what she wanted to say, and it's a damned good poem, and if you're going to start behaving like a Victorian prude, you might as well do a proper job of it and burn down the whole fucking school because you don't compromise the integrity of Art and call yourself an educator!' Words to that effect, right? And Marv says to me, 'Now, see here, Webster...' He calls me 'Webster' when he wants to be condescending. 'Now, see here, Webster,' he says, 'I've let you and your students get away with quite a lot in the past. You don't know about all the letters and calls I've gotten occasionally from people who were pretty upset about the magazine, but fortunately I was able to smooth things over. I've had to cover your ass on many occasions.' And I say to Marv, 'You fucking hypocrite! It's your own ass you're worried about! I can walk out of here tomorrow and have my pick of job offers — *at a higher salary, I might add!* Which was no lie because I'd been voted Teacher of the Year for the whole fucking city, and I had job offers coming in from all over the state. Well, Marv got all red, and he stood up and slammed his hand on his desk and said, 'This poem is banned from the magazine, and that's that! You'll have to explain it to the girl yourself!' And I told him, 'Marv, you're a fucking mediocrity,' and I walked out of his office."

"I would've killed the son of a bitch."

"Oh, I'm going to get my revenge in my own way, just you wait. I'm giving you the long story first, if you don't mind. Anyway, to get back to Cassie's poem..." He lit another cigarette. "I tell you, it hurt me so much to have to tell her that it had been banned. And I resented the fact that *I* was forced to tell her instead

of Marv, the fucking coward. I had to take her into my office privately and sit her down and tell her. I told her it wasn't my fault and that I loved her poem. And I said to her, 'And I love you, too.' It just slipped out, so I kept talking, telling her how bad I felt about the whole thing." Doug paused at this point and took a long swallow of Scotch. "And Cassie....She just looked at the floor and the tears started to fall down her cheeks, and she said, 'It's as if what I felt in my heart when I wrote that poem was something dirty. I put my heart and soul in my hands and set them down on paper, the way you always told us to, and now I'm being told by Dr. Zeller that it's ugly and unfit to be read!' And she gathered her books and said to me, 'I can never come back to Benton now, and your class was the only thing I really cared about, and now everything's ruined!' Of course, I tried to change her mind, but that poor girl was so devastated....I was devastated too, because I realized at that moment how deeply I loved her, and now she was never going to come back."

"In a way, you can't blame her."

"No, you're absolutely right. She wasn't going to compromise by swallowing such an insult from Marv. You or I wouldn't tolerate the censorship of our works."

"Certainly not."

"In Cassie's case, it was more than that, of course, because symbolically she was being made to feel a sense of shame for her feelings toward me, and she resented that. Not that Marv Zeller really understood what the poem was about anyway. The man's a baboon. But a 15-year-old girl like Cassie would have very sensitive feelings and would take the matter to heart in the worst way....Anyway, Cassie never came back to Benton." At this point Doug got up to make a couple more drinks for us. I was already at my limit. "And you want to hear what that baboon did? The magazine was laid out for a certain number of pages, right? And Cassie's poem was in the middle. Okay, so he realizes he's got a blank page to fill all of a sudden. So you know what he sticks in there? He digs out this fucking awful drawing of a *cocker spaniel* that he got from somebody in the Art Department — you know, some really schlocky drawing done by a freshman on her first day of class. You remember this, don't you? I always send you *Nova*."

I thought for a moment. "I think I do recall it now. Yeah, there was this corny drawing, and when I looked it up in the table of contents to see who did it, there was a poem listed instead."

"Right. And I told you in my letter that you should ignore the drawing because Marv Zeller had bumped one of my students' poems and stuck that in instead. Really, I think the man has a Hostess Twinkie for a brain."

"My memory's a little vague on this....So this is the poem that got censored. But I don't think you ever told me anything of a personal nature about you and Cassie."

Doug shook his head. "No offense, but it was just a little too sensitive to talk about. It was...." He sighed and looked sad for a moment as he rubbed his chin. Then he looked at me sternly. "Hell's bells, man! I practically put it all in that story I sent you — the one that appeared in the *M_____ Quarterly*. You didn't realize I was writing about myself and one of my girl students?"

"Well, uh...I didn't want to assume anything."

"Boy, you surprise me sometimes....Never mind. No, actually, you're quite correct not to assume anything. It doesn't matter how much literal truth there is in a story, but we all borrow from our own lives, don't we?...Anyway, let me get back to me and Marv and Cassie's poem. Now, this bad scene between Marv and me gradually blew over, and although I still had a grudge against him, I just kept the lid on it and did my job, right? Okay. Now, in the spring of '79, one of my senior girls who knew Cassie's family told me that Cassie had died. She had leukemia, and nobody outside her family knew she was dying. People knew she was kind of sickly, but the kid had enough guts not to talk about it because she didn't want people to feel sorry for her and treat her different or talk about her behind her back, you know?" He paused to light another cigarette, and he clicked his lighter shut as if he were angry. "Well, when I heard this, I thought, 'Marv Zeller, you stinking son of a bitch. I had to tell a girl who was dying — a girl I *loved* — that she wasn't allowed to write the word "prick" in her poem.' As if this were the most important issue, right? Can you imagine how that sounded to her? Christ, I'm telling you, I never hated a man so much in my life as I hated Zeller then because I realized what he had done was positively *obscene*. And this man is a fucking *authority figure*! This man runs a school devoted to the arts!"

"Had Cassie died just recently when you found out about her?"

"About two weeks before. It was a shame that I didn't know sooner because I would've gone to the funeral. But I

decided to do the next best thing. I called up her parents — I spoke to her mother actually — and they were really happy to hear from me. They invited me over, so I went to the house the next Saturday afternoon. Very big, old house in what I call the ‘Old Money’ neighborhood. Big trees, a garden, couple of colored servants, big car, the works — but all in good taste, mind you. Really, the spirit of the Old South. Mr. Reynolds — a wonderfully cultivated man. A real gentleman. And Mrs. Reynolds — a gorgeous woman in her mid-forties. That woman had real class, I’ll tell you. Two of the finest people I’ve ever met in this city. They had a son, too, but I didn’t get to meet him. So we had a very good conversation, and the mother told me that Cassie had been extremely brave about her illness, and her doctor had said she was really fighting it and that she might keep going for quite a while yet. You know, with leukemia it varies from one case to another. It’s like all cancers, it’s tricky. Anyway, her mother said that during the time that Cassie was in my class at Benton, her medical tests were coming out so good everyone was amazed. It was almost like a remission. And then after this fiasco with Marv censoring her poem and her dropping out of Benton, she started to decline again and got worse and worse until she died. Her mother thought there was a direct cause and effect. The father wasn’t so quick to agree. But I sort of think he didn’t want to believe that he had lost his daughter sooner than necessary because an idiot like Marv Zeller had destroyed her morale.”

“What do you think?”

“Oh, I think that’s exactly what happened. A person’s psychological state has a lot of influence on the course of an illness, even a fatal illness.”

“Yeah, I’ve read that somewhere. By the way, did her parents ever read her poem, and did they figure out Cassie was in love with you?”

“Oh, they read it all right. She even showed it to them. Reynoldssaid to me, ‘We’re not small-minded people, Mr. Webster. We have an understanding of life, and we understand our children.’ Which was an interesting way of phrasing it, you know, because I couldn’t tell whether the father understood that the poem was directed to me personally. But being a perfect Southern gentleman, he would’ve stated himself as graciously as possible. I said to them, ‘I was very fond of your daughter,’ and the father said, ‘She was fond of you, too.’ And the mother said

that Cassie had found my class very inspiring and that it had meant a lot to her. It was a pretty sad note to part on — for me, you understand. And then they both shook hands with me and thanked me for stopping by, and I left, and that was that.”

“But you still feel you have a score to settle with Marv Zeller?”

“Damned right I do.”

On the Friday after Lenny’s death, Zeller’s secretary spread the word that the funeral arrangements had been made, and the staff of Benton could (should) pay their respects, and that afterwards Marv Zeller was going to have some sort of reception in his home to pay tribute to his son in his own way.

Doug’s planned act of revenge amounted to this: he was going to concoct an idiotic poem and give it to Marv and tell him that Lenny had written it and sent it to him some time ago. He would induce Marv to read it to the guests at the reception, and this would make fools out of both Marv and Lenny, although the poem had to be just subtle enough to pass as genuine. I think you’ll agree that this kind of prank strains the limits of decency, but it gives you an idea of how deep the Cassandra Reynolds episode burned in Doug’s heart.

I said before that Lenny didn’t figure prominently in this story, but I have to take a moment to describe him as Doug described him to me. The circumstances of Lenny’s death pretty well summed up what sort of person he was. We’re talking about a 21-year-old guy who got himself killed doing tricks on his motorcycle to amuse an audience of 13-year-olds. Lenny was a goof. Not a malicious goof, but still a goof. He dropped out of high school and never had a substantial permanent job. He had no ambition to do anything. Now and then he dabbled in some hobby or other, but he never got serious about any of them. Marv would badger him to grow up, but Lenny really did not want to have any part of the adult world, except when he wanted something. He was spoiled (the motorcycle being a prime example), and he knew how to lie and manipulate. He never had a girlfriend — in fact, he never went on a date — and there were rumors that he was queer and that he played around with young boys. He was once charged with possession of marijuana, but he got off with a warning. He never did anything you would call criminal; he just had a reputation of being a ne’er-do-well and all-around fuck-up.

So Doug and I sat talking and drinking late on this Friday night, and sometime after midnight, he put down his empty glass with an emphatic plunk and said, "Okay, pardner. You and me are gonna put our heads together and write the worst fucking poem in the history of the English language and put Lenny's name on it."

"It's not so easy for a good writer to write badly deliberately."

"True, but this is one thing you have a particular talent for." He was referring to the fact that I had worked for a vanity press for two and a half years and had steeped myself in bad writing that was unintentionally funny.

"It mustn't look like an obvious joke," I warned. "It's got to be rotten yet believable. You don't want Marv to smell a rat."

"It won't be too offensive either, but we'll throw in just a hint of Lenny's being queer. And we have to include the word 'prick.'"

"Okay," I said. "And the poem's got to rhyme. Any poem from a guy like Lenny would have to rhyme. And we'll misspell some words."

We got out a lot of paper and started scratching out a few stupid lines, searching for just the right tone to fit an immature jerk trying sincerely to write a serious poem. It took us a while to get into the right mind-set, and we argued about which of our bad lines and ideas were suitable. After a few false starts, we were scribbling away like demons, churning out more stuff than we could possibly use, and then we argued some more about what to throw out and what to keep. By the time we were satisfied, it was 3:30 a.m. This was the result of our collaboration:

I've Said Hello

By Lenny Zeller

*I wish I could have a beer,
As I was sitting here,
And drink to the morning dew,
When I was sad thru and thru,
And watch the fading moon slipping behind the sun
To leave me with my thoughts on the run,
Told by the quiet nite to me,*

*For it must also equal it's spree,
And I know life is a unfair game,
You can be rich or die in the flame,
You break the rules and you must pay,
Some say the thing is to pray,
And so I hide my thoghts inside,
I know that I've tried,
To be the way I aught to be,
But I can only be me,
Trying to be free,
They say be a man if you can,
Dont leave your manhood in a pan,
I would uncursed my tortchured mind,
And my prick I would unblind,
Society's way to conform,
And avoid the evil storm,
I could work for the smog board,
And drink beer for an oncore,
Give a day rest give a day work,
Keep smooth the jerk,
I look for truth,
To keep me in my youth,
But it just goes allwrong,
Like an offkey song,
I wish I was never borned,
The prying eyes on me have scorned,
They dont know the pain inside,
Because my manhood has gone for a ride,
So I'll just drink another beer,
And watch to recieve some cheer,
Untill then I will know,
I've said hello.*

I said to Doug, "It might be a bit too long, don't you think?"
"Too long for what? This is a fucking masterpiece."

Then I thought of something. "Hold it. Are you going to type this or write it by hand?"

"Uh oh." Doug and I looked at each other. Doug had no idea what Lenny's handwriting was like, and even hand-printing might look phony.

"You'd have to type it," I concluded, "but what kind of typewriter would Marv have in his home?"

Doug had an IBM Selectric, as well as a cheap portable. He thought Marv Zeller had a Selectric at home, too. But not all Selectrics had the same type style. We were both thrown by this obstacle momentarily.

"Listen," he said at last, "we're not going to throw away a brainstorm like this because of a little detail. I say we type it on the cheap portable. Marv won't even think about the typing. Lenny could've typed it anywhere, and besides, it's supposed to be from a year or two ago, right?...Yeah, what the hell."

Doug tore a piece of lined paper out of an old spiral notebook, typed the poem, folded the paper, and steamed it over a tea kettle to enhance the appearance of age.

Now, I realized we were doing a nasty thing, but at the time, my perverse sense of humor had the better of me and I sympathized with Doug. Besides, if the joke went amiss, it was his ass, not mine.

Sunday.

Lenny Zeller received a dignified and perfectly normal funeral service in church, followed by the burial in the cemetery. Almost all of the Benton staff were there, plus lots of relatives and friends of the family. I felt sorry for Lenny when the coffin was lowered into the ground. Afterwards, everyone went back to their cars, and most of them continued on to Marv Zeller's house for the reception.

It was a nice enough house. Nothing remarkable about it, though. We were in the living room, and in the adjacent dining room there was a tray of sandwiches and coffee and drinks. I think one of the neighbors had helped out with these. Mrs. Zeller was a very plain woman who didn't make much of an impression on me. Doug introduced me to her, and I made the usual expressions of sympathy. She thanked me and apologized that there weren't enough chairs for everyone. She encouraged us to eat and drink, so Doug and I had a couple of sandwiches and drinks. I also met the daughter, Darlene, who was about twenty-five. She was fat, not very good-looking, and she seemed more annoyed than sad. She went to the bathroom a lot. That's all I remember about her.

There was a slide projector set up on a table, along with a cassette player and a bunch of stuff I assumed had belonged to Lenny. There was also a framed picture of him, but it didn't look too recent. Doug remarked to me under his breath that Marv was apparently going to put on a tacky little show of nostalgia. When he spotted Marv alone in the kitchen for a moment, he went in, took out the envelope containing "Lenny's" poem from his inside jacket pocket, and handed it to Marv. I saw Marv take out the sheet of paper and look at it briefly as Doug spoke to him with a suitably reverent expression, and Marv nodded and put his hand on Doug's shoulder as if to thank him. When Doug came back, he said to me, "He took the bait. I'll bet anything he reads it aloud to everyone." He was suppressing a grin, and his eyes had a look of malicious anticipation. It hit me then that this prank could backfire seriously, and I became pretty jittery.

Marv came into the living room and asked for everyone's attention. He thanked everyone for coming, and he said he wanted to share with them some personal mementos from Lenny's life because they were sure to find them interesting and because he felt some people had underestimated Lenny as a person. Doug and I drifted unobtrusively to a corner of the room, where we could watch people's reactions as well as Marv's presentation. All the seats were filled, and the rest of the guests stood more or less in a semicircle, leaving a wide space for Marv and the projection screen that he was now setting up at one end of the room.

When the projector and screen were set up properly, Marv put a record on the stereo. "This was Lenny's favorite record, and I want to play it as background music to the slides," said Marv. Then he turned out the lights, leaving the room in semi-darkness.

The first slide flashed on: Lenny as a 5-year-old digging in the dirt with a shovel. At the same time, we heard Simon and Garfunkel sing: *Hello, darkness, my old friend...I've come to talk with you again....* Doug covered his face with one hand and grabbed my arm with the other. I thought he was going to burst into laughter and make me do the same. I had to bite my lip to control myself.

We were treated to a succession of utterly banal slides of Lenny's childhood, including a slew of them taken at the Alamo, and meanwhile these very emotional Simon and Garfunkel songs were playing. The whole thing was an absurd contradiction, but

the thing that got me was that everyone in the room seemed to be taking this very seriously. A lot of the women took out hankies and dabbed at their eyes, and people were *oohing* and *aahing* at the sight of Lenny as a cute kid. (I'm sure Al Capone looked cute as a kid, too.) A few people looked a bit bored after a while. I assumed the Benton teachers were smart enough not to be sucked in by this tacky show and that it was probably the relatives who were showing all the emotion. (As I found out later, this wasn't the case.)

After about fifteen minutes of this bullshit, Marv was finished with the slides, and he turned off the stereo and put on the lights. Everyone smiled to show how appreciative and deeply moved they were. I wondered how this audience would react to the poem we had concocted.

Then Marv held up various personal items belonging to Lenny. "These were his boots that he wore on special occasions." Ugly Western-style boots. "This was his Boy Scout handbook. He wasn't in the Scouts too long, but I know he liked it."

Doug remarked to me under his breath, "*Probably got kicked out.*"

"Here are some souvenirs...a pen from the Alamo...a paperweight I brought him from Cape Cod...and here are some of his favorite psychedelic buttons..." And Lenny's baseball cards and comic books and monster magazines, and plenty of other stupid little things, all of which were supposed to seem terribly poignant on this occasion. And then there was this hideous water color from his fourth grade class — either a duck or goose or swan (I couldn't tell which) floating on a pond.

"*This is fucking unbelievable,*" Doug whispered to me.

"Lenny was very interested in birds," said Marv proudly, as he held up the ambiguous bird painting.

"*It's news to me,*" whispered Doug.

"In fact, he put together a tape cassette of his favorite bird songs from several records. He even asked me to buy him some binoculars so he could go birdwatching."

"*Yeah, right,*" whispered Doug.

As if we had not yet reached the limit of absurdity, this bird cassette was the *ne plus ultra*.

"Lenny told me he had seen most of these birds at one time or another. The rarest bird he ever saw was an ivory woodpecker, I think it's called, but that one isn't on the tape."

Doug whispered to me, "*The ivory-billed woodpecker is considered extinct.*"

The cassette began to play. A narrator with a suitably scholarly voice gave the name of each bird, which was followed by the actual bird call or song.

"*The Emperor Goose....hawnnnk...hawnnnk...hawnnnk...*"

Doug whispered in my ear, "*That's not a Southern bird.*"

"*The Common Eider....brrrp...brrrp...oooo...brrrp...brrrp...oooo...*"

"*That's not a Southern bird either.*"

"*The Red-Footed Booby....braaap-braaap-braaap-pa-pa-pa-pa....braw-braw-braw-braw...*"

"*Gimme a break.*"

"*The Chachalaca....brenng-a-oo...brenng-a-oo...brenng-a-oo...*"

Doug shook his head.

"*The Great Gray Owl....whoo...whoo...whoo...whoo...*"

"*Strix nebulosa. Found only in the Northwest.*" I looked at Doug with astonishment. He smiled at me sideways. "*Literature ain't the only thing I know about.*"

"*Townsend's Solitaire....tee-ta-twee-too...twee-twee...tee-ta-twee-too...*"

He shook his head. "*No way.*"

"*The Hermit Warbler....tee-ta-tee-ta-twee-twee-twee-twee-twee....*"

"*Doubt it,*" murmured Doug.

The bird cassette went on for about twenty minutes, and when it had finished and people were exchanging remarks about Lenny's deep involvement with ornithology and his capacity for aesthetic appreciation, Doug said to me, "*It's all a crock of shit, you know. Only a few of those birds could have been seen in this part of the country.*"

I was wondering whether the show was over. I was itching to leave because I'd had enough of this nonsense, but Doug didn't move. I was thinking about that poem.

"Well!" said Marv, smiling at his audience. "How about that!"

"Wonderful!"

"Lovely!"

"Terrific!"

Marv reached into his inside jacket pocket. "Well, I've

been saving the best for last. Actually, to be quite honest, I didn't know this, uh, item existed until it was given to me earlier by Doug Webster." Everyone looked at Doug, who had on his most dignified expression. Marv took the folded sheet out of the envelope. "It seems that Lenny tried his hand at poetry, and I didn't know a thing about it. He wrote this poem the year before last and sent it to Doug for his opinion....And what did you tell him, Doug?"

Doug cleared his throat. "I told him it didn't matter whether it was good or not as long as it gave him pleasure. I have no idea if he wrote any more besides this."

Good answer, I thought.

"I'm certainly going to have a look later on," said Marv. "In the meantime, I would like to read this poem to all of you. I only had a chance to read it once by myself, so I make no claims about it being good, but I think it shows some deep qualities."

The audience was obviously very interested. All conversation stopped, and people stopped sipping their drinks. A lady on the sofa leaned forward and rested her chin on her hand, her face a study in rapt attention.

Marv cleared his throat and began to read. He stumbled over a couple of misspelled words. When he came to the word "prick" he read it in a soft, clear voice tinged with sadness. No one batted an eye. The lady on the sofa looked like she was about to cry. I couldn't believe an audience of reasonably intelligent people could be so taken in by such a piece of drivel, but in retrospect I saw that Doug and I had done our job all too well: the joke was so perfect that it was lost on people. We had created a totally believable rotten poem, and no one doubted that it had been written by Lenny. By the time Marv finished the reading, people were reacting audibly, and several ladies were weeping. "That's the most beautiful thing I ever heard," said the lady on the sofa.

"Breathtaking," said the next-door neighbor, a man of about seventy.

Marv gathered in the glowing looks of admiration and the many compliments. Then he folded the paper delicately and said, "I knew my boy had hidden talents...but *this*...." He shook his head and smiled proudly to cover his sadness. Then he put the envelope back in his pocket. "Well, my dear friends, let's not wallow in grief. There's still food and drinks left, so help yourselves."

A few minutes later, Doug decided we ought to leave. Marv walked us to the front door. He shook Doug's hand and said, "It was mighty good of you to save that poem and let me have it."

"Well, I figured you deserved it," said Doug with a straight face.

"You know, you're not the bad fellow I once thought you were. I misjudged you."

"That's okay, Marv. Life is like school. We're all here as students, aren't we?"

"Yes, yes, well said, heh, heh...." He shook hands with me, too.

Later on, back at his place, I asked Doug if he felt he'd gotten the revenge he wanted. He thought about it and then nodded. "Yeah. My conscience is satisfied. I did it in memory of Cassie."

"I'm sure glad there wasn't a bad scene. I'll tell you, I was having second thoughts."

"I think a few people may have second thoughts about Lenny and about Marv. Maybe later on, when they think about it....Oh, well, doesn't matter. Shoot, pardner! That was a great stunt! I'm going to remember it on my deathbed and be comforted."

The following day was Monday, and my flight was scheduled for 5 p.m. Doug dismissed his afternoon class early so he could spend a little more time with me before it was time to go to the airport. I'm always quite nervous before I fly because I'm afraid to be late. I never am late, but all the packing and clock-watching puts me on edge. I had a couple of drinks to calm down. I sat in one of the living room chairs and just looked at the thousands of books lining the walls. I wished I could have this much space back in Toronto. Doug had the main floor of an old house, and the rent was cheap. I looked around wondering how many years it would be before I could sit with him again in his own digs. If he ever came up to Toronto I couldn't offer him very much comfort or space.

I thought about what the weather would be like back home and asked him to turn off the air conditioner and open all

the windows. It was warm and muggy out. When we heard a bird chirp, Doug quipped, "Ivory-billed woodpecker!" Then he sat down and picked up the carbon copy of the poem we'd written, and he reread it, savoring the delicious rottenness of it. "Here, take it back to Canada as a souvenir."

I asked him how he would like someone to pull a stunt on him the way we did on Lenny, and he said, "I'd be dead, so how would I know?"

"Yeah, but...well, you know, some things are supposed to be sacred."

"Listen, you want to do something bizarre at my funeral, be my guest. Just make it worthy of your creative talents."

"I could go first, in which case the opportunity would be yours," I said.

"I'd read selections from your letters. I have a boxful of them."

"Oh, Christ."

As we drove to the airport, it began to rain heavily. Doug figured all the flights would be delayed, so he parked and came inside and sat with me in the terminal for an hour or so. I love to fly, but I hate waiting in a terminal. I found it hard to make conversation, but Doug talked freely. He said the rain reminded him of the day his mother was buried. She had died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage about a week after they'd moved to a new town, and hardly anybody knew them. And when they buried her, it was just him and his brother and their father and two neighbors and the minister, and they had a very simple service at the grave site as the rain poured down on them. He was twelve and his brother was fourteen. And when the service was over, the boys and their father went home alone, and that was that.

As I boarded the plane, I saw a girl who looked a lot like Cassandra Reynolds, and I thought it would be nice if we ended up sitting next to each other, but we didn't. I had a middle seat, and the window seat to my left was unoccupied. The sun had set by the time we took off, and the clouds were thick and violet as the plane climbed through them. I looked out the window, just letting my mind wander, and felt a twinge of sadness and

loneliness for no particular reason. The reading light above me was on, and I reached up and switched it off. Then I rested my left hand upon the vacant seat and pretended to hold hands with Cassandra Reynolds's ghost.

“Don’t You Know Who This Is?”

I’d been cleaning toilets and mopping floors at the C——— Hospital for about six months. This was after I’d left Toronto and gone into exile to a city I prefer not to name. I don’t want to say why I went into exile. It wouldn’t make any sense to anyone, except maybe Joe, my co-worker.

I had started out working at the C———— Hospital part-time. The rest of the time I drank pretty heavily, read the odd book, and watched TV. I didn’t like working days, though. There were too many people to look at. I don’t just mean in the hospital, I mean out there in the world generally. I wanted to see as few people as possible. Since I wasn’t sleeping well at night, I asked to be put on the night shift. That was a full shift, but I took it anyway. The night passed more easily than the day. Also, the pay was better. And it was easier for me to get to the liquor store in the daytime, do my drinking, and fall asleep.

As I started to explain, I’d been there around six months when Joe was hired as the other night cleaner. The first thing that struck me — and I’ll always remember this — was the way he introduced himself. The supervisor was taking him around and stopped before the janitor’s closet, where I was filling a bucket. The supervisor said to him, “This is Lou, the other cleaner.” And when I extended my hand, Joe extended his, looked me right in the eye with his cool, magnetic blue eyes, and said very clearly, “How do you do. I’m Joe Elliott.” And right away I knew this was

a person of some breeding and intelligence — a *gentleman*. You have to realize that most of the guys I'd worked with were not exactly genteel. For the most part, you don't find intellectuals cleaning toilets in hospitals. I was an exception, but I'm not talking about myself here.

"Lou knows the routine," the supervisor told Joe. And then he said to me, "Just divvy up the work so Joe gets a taste of everything." Then the supervisor went off to smoke cigarettes and read the *Enquirer*. He had learned early on that he didn't have to supervise me. Left to myself, I had devised my own system and had that damned hospital in the palm of my dishpan hands.

Joe didn't talk much at first, though he was extremely polite. "Yes," "Thank you," "Of course," "I understand," and so on — all spoken in a beautifully modulated voice.

He was evasive about his background. He said that he had only recently moved to the city and merely wanted to work at any sort of night job because he was an insomniac. He said he'd lived in a lot of places, most recently Montreal. He was 39 years old, divorced twice, no children, and claimed to have no particular profession. My instinct told me this was not the whole truth. But I thought it best not to press him if he preferred to be secretive. I just kept things friendly and tried to help him adjust to the job.

He had big, strong hands but not those of an ordinary manual laborer. There was something agile about them, like the hands of a craftsman. I could tell that this sort of work was a change for him. The first time he attacked a dirty toilet with a sponge and cleanser, he did it with — how can I put it — a sense of masochism. I may have been projecting a part of myself into what I saw, but I could imagine him thinking to himself, *Here! Stick your hands in this filthy toilet, Joe Elliott! It's what you deserve!* He didn't flinch at any task. In fact, the filthier the job was, the more willingly he threw himself into it. I even had to restrain him once or twice by saying, "Wait a minute, we do this the easy way around here," and I'd show him an easier or cleaner way of doing some dirty or awkward job.

During our breaks, Joe was taciturn, though he was willing to make conversation if I prompted him. I watched his eyes, the way they studied everything around him intensely. I could swear that he studied a particular window for five minutes, or perhaps it was the view of the smokestack. I didn't ask. There was a complex mind behind those eyes, no doubt of that.

Joe asked me where I'd come from and I said Toronto. He asked me why I'd moved, and I replied, "The cost of living," and he just nodded.

For about two weeks we shared the regular routine as cleaners, and I was trying to think of a way to get this guy to open up but couldn't. He wasn't unfriendly, mind you. He just seemed determined to keep certain private doors shut. When we got off at 6 a.m. every morning, he went his way, and I went mine. I wouldn't have had the nerve to ask him around to my place for a friendly visit because I just sensed he wanted to be left alone.

Then one night he came in looking so desolate he had me worried that he might quit. I didn't want him to quit because I liked the guy, whoever or whatever he was. He paused with a sigh as he held onto a mop and asked me, "You don't actually like this job, do you?"

I gave him a half-smile and replied, "It's a lousy, dirty job, and that's exactly why I took it. It's just the way I felt, that's all."

"I understand," he said, wringing out his mop. And then he mumbled something I don't think I was supposed to catch: "*It's the Borinage.*"

But I heard him all right and said with a grin, "Yeah, poor young Van Gogh down in the pits with the miners....Of course, the pay here is a hell of a lot better."

Joe let go of the mop and stared at me. His mouth was open and he stood there looking about as shocked as I've ever seen a person look.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Jesus Christ!....You knew what I was referring to!"

"Yeah, well....I do know something about Van Gogh. He was a lay preacher in the most squalid part of Belgium before he became an artist. Hey, did you see *Lust for Life*, with Kirk Douglas? That's one of my favorite movies."

Joe wiped his hands slowly and shook his head in disbelief. "It so happens that Van Gogh is my idol. Van Gogh is the ultimate. Van Gogh was plugged into the great Cosmic mystery....Imagine coming to work in this bloody hospital and meeting a cleaner who knows about Van Gogh....Have you ever, uh, studied art?"

"No, but I've read a lot of art books. Actually, uh...I'm mostly into literature. Fiction. You know, good stuff, not the best-sellers list."

"Do you have a favorite author?"

"Henry Miller. I've read almost all his books, but I like the two *Tropics* and the *Sexus, Plexus and Nexus* trilogy best."

"I'm afraid you have the advantage over me there. I never got around to reading those, but I did read his hand-scripted book with his water colors. I forget the title..."

"*Insomnia, Or the Devil at Large.*"

"That's it. Some quit playful stuff in it. Reminded me a bit of Picasso."

"Yeah, I thought so, too."

Joe cocked his head at me shrewdly and remarked, "You're not entirely what you appear to be."

"Neither are you."

I thought this was the moment when it was all going to come out, but when I put it to him directly, he put me off. "Don't ask me what I am, and don't tell me what you are," he said in a tone of voice that was determined but not hostile. "As long as we're here we're both cleaners, and I prefer to leave it at that, okay? No offense. It's just because of certain things, that's all. You want to have discussions about art and literature and whatever, fine. I'm glad to have someone I can talk to like a civilized person."

"Okay," I said, trying not to show how hurt I was. I was ready to spill everything to him, but it was just vanity. So I just forced myself to suppress it, although it was hard. Later on, I realized he was right. It was better that way. If I'd had the nerve to call myself something I had no right to, I would've hated myself for it afterwards. He had probably saved me from some embarrassment.

Anyway, we cleaned the hell out of that hospital, and we talked and debated about a lot of deep stuff, and the time passed easily. We never let our super overhear us because if you talked about the wrong things in the wrong workplaces, you were in for a hard time. I had had plenty of first-hand experience at that. Just speaking proper English could mark you as an oddball.

The discussions we had were so amazing (that's a poor adjective, but it's the one that most readily comes to mind) I wish I could have recorded them. We should have been on some sort of educational TV show. Nobody would have believed it — two guys on their hands and knees scrubbing porcelain fixtures while talking ardently about Van Gogh's paintings and attempting to

draw parallels in their symbolism to the novels of Knut Hamsun! (I was going through my Hamsun phase at the time.) I hope God records such things so that when I die I get to see a replay. Whenever the super happened to come along, we stopped abruptly and pretended to talk about the weather or hockey.

I remember one night in particular. It was around 4 a.m., and Joe stood holding some dirty rags while gazing out a window (there was nothing to see but the opposite wing of the hospital) as he described Van Gogh's *Country Road By Night*, one of the paintings of the Saint-Rémy period: "In the foreground is the road, rendered in fluid brush strokes that suggest a moving river..." Joe pointed into space as if recreating the painting within the frame of the window. He spoke slowly and in a reverent tone. "Two men walking along the road, and not far behind, a yellow cart with a white horse in harness. In the centre of the painting, this tall cypress which seems to writhe with life. A field of brown and yellow cane, and a sky of shimmering ultramarine with an exaggerated yellow ball on the left surrounded by a halo, representing a star, and on the right side a slender crescent moon. The whole painting seems to swirl with energy. Everything — the road, the field, the tree, the sky, and the men on the road — they're all a part of a great living Cosmic mystery. And it was into this swirling Cosmos that Van Gogh was to surrender his own life. It's as if his very soul, his very identity, were leaking out of him and flowing into the physical world, like smoke dissipating into the air. Because, you see, his suicide was not an act of self-destruction, it was the final act of surrender of his being to the great organism of the Universe that was claiming it. In *Crows Over a Wheatfield* the sky has nearly solidified, and the sense of distance is lost. The flight of the crows represents a rapid death, because the fact is that Van Gogh could not abide the thought of growing old and dying slowly." Joe turned around and faced me. "Van Gogh was as alive in his sorrow and desolation as any mortal man has ever been in happiness, and *that* is what made him the transcendent and magnificent artist that he was...And that is why...that is why...any other artist cannot help but feel...hopelessly inferior...I..." He shook his head sadly and then forced a little smile. "When you look up to someone like Van Gogh and realize his greatness...I mean, I'm talking just as a generalization now...I mean, what an artist must feel....One's own ambition in the face of such a model of greatness would just crumble away....An artist

could go on for years thinking he's such hot shit, you know, and then something happens in his life...something...some personal upset...and then suddenly he sees everything differently, he sees what a hopelessly inferior nonentity he is, as if his whole life has been built on lies and self-deception and false praise. I can remember....um, what I mean is...." Then he frowned and shook his head. "Never mind, I'm just shooting my mouth off. I don't even know what the hell I'm talking about."

"Yeah, right. It's okay. I understand you better than you think." At that moment the super came by to ask us if the floor waxer was working okay now (a short in the wiring), and I said it was good now.

There were times when Joe's presence made me think of what I'd left behind, and I was reminded of my own failure. At home I would drag "The Big Box" out of the closet and look at all the old notebooks that seemed to belong to another existence. I thought, *If only there were something good in all that crap*. I used to worry about losing The Big Box in a fire or flood because I thought it was valuable, but now I was more worried about who would find it if I were to die, because it was all dreadful stuff, and some of it would hurt and embarrass some people. I used to think I had something, but then a personal upset had hit me, and I just wanted to chuck it all and disappear because it didn't matter any more. And I wasn't going to be one of those success-after-failure inspirational stories either. My story was exile-after-failure and now I was far away from Toronto, that city that is so murderous to the sincere, cleaning toilets in a hospital, and who was I to think I didn't deserve it? I told myself I sort of liked it. In any case, I couldn't walk out, because I had nothing to go back to, and no one to go back to either.

Once I got this letter, which had been sent to me in care of my sister's store, and she had passed it on to me. And believe it or not, some total stranger — a girl in Vancouver — had come across something of mine in a defunct, ten-year-old magazine, and she wanted to know where she could read more of my work! Christ, of all the dumb things to get in the mail — a barely discernible wave from the far side of the burned bridge. How such a simple expression of kindness can tear at a heart. What a pathetic, contradictory creature a human being can become. At

the moment when I thought my defenses were the strongest, I was apt to be utterly undone by some trivial thing and see with painful clarity the absurdity and futility into which my life had fallen.

And there was one day I got very drunk from drinking an entire bottle of Imperial Sherry (a favorite of winos) and sat in the closet with The Big Box and closed the door on myself. And I rested my head upon that dusty box and thought, *You have created shit. Sit here in the dark like some sort of bug and breathe the no-good shit you have created. You put all you had into it, and still it wasn't any good, you empty scum, you worthless piece of putrescence.* And if I could have thought of a fine way to degrade myself even further, I would have done it, but I was drunk and tired and finally went to bed, and much later the moon rose, and I arose with it and went to the hospital and thought with perverse satisfaction, *This is your proper place in the world.*

Joe and I continued to have good discussions at work. He could be quite funny when he felt like it. He told me about the time he got himself thrown out of a flea market where they sold these mass-produced oil paintings. He asked the vendor which painting would look better in his outhouse — the one with the old cobbler mending a shoe with his cocker spaniel beside him, or the misty Parisian street scene with the misspelled store sign and the impossible reflections in the puddles of water? The vendor was not sure whether she was being put on, so he became bolder and said he also wanted something for his dog's doghouse. Then the vendor's husband came over and Joe picked a quarrel with him outright over the exploited foreigners who churned out these monstrosities for pitiful wages. "A Greek guy, you know," Joe remarked. "I never met a Greek on this side of the Atlantic who had any taste at all. Most of them are mercenary dipshits. On the other side it's not as bad. Most of them are still rather brainless, but there's still a cultured segment of society in Greece."

"Have you spent much time over there?"

"Hell, I've been all over. There was one year I was in twelve different countries." He paused, perhaps considering whether he was divulging too much. "Of course, Europe has gotten very corrupted by American culture, but it still has plenty of real culture — the old culture. North American culture is a backed-up sewer by comparison." After another pause he added

sadly, "I should've been born in the nineteenth century. I should've been a young man in the eighteen-eighties or so." He shook his head in mild disgust. "Fate sort of screwed up the timetable, I guess. I mean, this century...this decade....Forget it!" I knew he definitely wanted to say more, but he compressed his lips and suddenly applied himself with angry energy to the task at hand — taking down dust-filled light fixtures for cleaning.

And so we went on for nearly two months, the two of us cleaning C———— Hospital every night like good, faithful, dumb proletarians. And it wasn't so bad at all. And even if I was still drinking a bit much and thinking about the past, wasn't I better off than I'd been in Toronto? So I was a cleaner, so what? I had left behind exactly two friends after fourteen years in Toronto. Think of it. If that isn't proof of one's failure, I don't know what is. Naturally, they had urged me not to leave, not to give up, not to take my personal disappointment so badly and all that, but I was reacting out of pure emotion. I left, cutting off all ties just to spite myself, and here I was. If a guy like Joe could end up here and it was okay for him, then I could and it was okay for me, too. As long as you had a bit of intelligent company, any situation was bearable. Hell itself would be bearable.

It was on a Friday night that it all came to an end. Joe and I were doing the toilets on the first floor when the supervisor came in with this tall, very serious-looking, well-dressed gent of around sixty in a black suit and, so help me, a bowler hat just like the Brits wear. He had a fierce-looking moustache and he held a handsome walking stick with a silver handle.

"So! I've found you at last!" he barked at Joe in a British accent. Joe stood up and wiped his hands, looking embarrassed. The man dismissed our super with the words, "You may leave us alone now. This is private business." And I guess it was the guy's clothes or the tone of voice, because the super went away without a word.

I stood there wondering whether Joe was going to introduce us, but this guy continued, "Elliott, are you out of your mind? Hiding yourself in a place like this, for God's sake? Have you gone insane?"

"Lou, this is Mr. Drake, a business acquaintance," said Joe.

"Hello, sir," I said, but Drake ignored me.

"Now listen, Elliott. No one must know where I found you, do you understand? My God, if this got out.... We're going to say that you were in the south of France working in seclusion, do you understand?" He sounded pretty angry, so I didn't interrupt.

"How'd you find me?" asked Joe.

"With great perseverance, I assure you, and my own absence has required some explaining while I was out searching for you! You've caused me a lot of inconvenience, but don't worry, because you're going to make it up to me!" And when he grabbed Joe by the arm, Joe just gave me a sheepish look over his shoulder as he allowed himself to be taken out. I think he must have been secretly glad to be found because he offered no resistance.

"Bye, Lou," he said. "It's been great knowing you."

"Bye, Joe," I said.

Drake stopped suddenly in the doorway and glared back at me. I don't think he intended to look quite as hostile or insulting as he did, but that was the way he looked at me anyway. "DON'T YOU KNOW WHO THIS IS?" he demanded. "Not that a person like *you* could possibly know! Well, this is R.J. Elliott!"

"Okay," I said, because I didn't know what else to say. And I didn't even think to protest because this man Drake was taking away my only friend in the entire city.

Drake and Joe Elliott disappeared, leaving me alone with my mop and bucket and a floor and toilets waiting for my attention. And under the bright fluorescent lights (brighter than usual because we had cleaned those fixtures so beautifully) I felt terribly, terribly alone. I just stood there not moving for a long time, looking at the walls around me. There was nothing to look at. This was just another place in the world, C—— Hospital, and I was just a man whose fate it was to come here every night to clean. And nobody was ever going to come for me.

Henry

You would have seen Henry on the southwest corner of Yonge and Bloor, outside of Stollery's clothing store, preaching the gospel. I say "preaching" out of deference to him. I'm not sure it deserved to be called preaching, for reasons I will get to in a moment.

He was in his seventies and had white hair and very pale skin that evidently avoided the sun. He wore clothes that were old but clean, and he had a preference for a black topcoat in the winter and a black suit in the summer.

He was a frail-looking man who stood very stiffly and walked slowly. He would stand in front of the Stollery's window facing Bloor St. He would hold a Bible, but he never read to the crowd from it. He kept it merely as a reference in the unlikely case he should get into a discussion with a passer-by.

I said a moment ago that his preaching was not quite preaching. This is because his voice was so soft you could barely hear it, and he never made eye contact with anyone. His voice could not be heard above the normal street noise beyond a radius of about 12 feet. As you passed him, you heard only a bit of mumbling in a squeaky voice. No one passing by could possibly catch a complete coherent sentence. And I'm not sure that he was ever aware of the public except in a general way. He never looked anyone in the eye. You could have stood next to him and, unless you spoke to him, he would have ignored you. His line of

vision seemed to be aimed approximately at the white line down the middle of Bloor St., and his head turned very slowly from left to right in an arc of about 45 degrees, like a rusty radar antenna trying to keep up with fast-moving waist-high segments of pedestrians.

One day as a joke, a young man (a writer, in fact) walked up to Henry and said, "Excuse me. I'm from out of town, and I'd like to know where I can buy some hard-core pornography."

Henry looked at the fellow blankly for a second and replied that he didn't know. Then he slowly extracted a leaflet from his pocket with an arthritic hand and said, "Would you like one of these?"

"No, thanks, I was in the mood for pornography," said the young man, walking away.

"You can still be saved," Henry mumbled after him.

Henry would take his breaks at McDonald's around the corner. He would often sit with another man his own age, a friend from church who didn't do much of anything. They would sit and nurse their coffees and hamburgers for a long time and talk about doing the work of the Lord and about the Bible, and sometimes about their health. They never spoke to any of the other patrons, and nobody spoke to them either. After their break, his friend would go home, and Henry would go back to Bloor St. and mumble disjointed pieces of Scripture at the public for another hour or so, and then he would go home, too.

I wish I could say that something exciting or terrible happened to Henry — that he won a million dollars in a lottery or got stabbed to death or was caught in some lewd act. But nothing of any importance happened to him. He did have a mild stroke in the summer of 1984, which is why you haven't seen him since, nor will you ever again. Now he sits in his room in his daughter's home on a peaceful, tree-lined street. He looks out the window all day and occasionally mumbles Scripture in incomplete sentences to people walking along the sidewalk. His friend from church visits him occasionally, and they have a coffee and talk about whatever they have in common, which is to say religion and old age.

Despite his medication, Henry does not fall asleep until very late at night. And every Tuesday and Friday morning around 7:30, when the garbage men come by, he hears them in his sleep, and he dreams that they are the angels come to pick him up.

No Chekhov at Yorkdale

It was on a rainy day with no business to be done that I decided to take a little ride over to Yorkdale Shopping Centre and buy a nice book of stories by Anton Chekhov. Reader, before you die, you must see to it that you spend one rainy day doing nothing but reading the stories of Anton Chekhov. When you are on your deathbed you will perhaps remember that day and be comforted. You may even be lucky enough to have your book of Chekhov stories with you on your deathbed so you can reread them. And if you are even luckier, the nurses who attend to you will have had some education and will not say anything stupid or try to take your book away so that you can "rest". An acquaintance of mine got stuck with a nurse who had never heard of Chekhov. "You mean the fellow on *Star Trek*?" she asked him, whereupon he insulted her so that she took his book away and made him rest. He died the next day. His bookmark was found near the end of "My Life," at the page containing the passage, "*...It was incomprehensible to me what these sixty thousand people lived for, why they read the Gospels, what they prayed for, why they read books and magazines. What benefit did they derive from all that had been spoken and written if they still were possessed of the same spiritual darkness and aversion to freedom as they had been a hundred or three hundred years ago?*" I'm told that his spirit

walked the hospital for thirteen days and tormented that nurse so badly with strange sounds and falling objects that she required a leave of absence and then refused to come back. But I digress.

Reader, the Future of Commercial Democracy is here! I give you...YORKDALE SHOPPING CENTRE!

The inside of Yorkdale must look to the new immigrant from the Third World much as the inside of the spaceship looked to Richard Dreyfuss in *Close Encounters*. What dazzling colors! What mystifying sounds! What vistas! What feelings of stupefaction! Yes, a Garden of Eden. Why, the Garden of Eden must have been a shabby sight by comparison. Besides which, it was outdoors. Yorkdale is so perfectly enclosed that one can connect to it from the subway without ever going outside.

Reader — *Fellow Prisoner of the Nineties* — you can buy almost anything your beating heart desires, almost anything your mind can envision, almost anything your desperate soul thirsts for — but you cannot find a book of stories by Anton Chekhov anywhere in the Yorkdale Shopping Centre.

There is no end to the clothing stores in which you may shop (my right hand would fling itself off my wrist in protest if I were to attempt to list them all), because even if you are a pathetic excuse for a human being, you can dress yourself as a beautiful specimen of humanity — fashionable, if not actually god-like.

You can choose from a wondrous variety of appliances, foodstuffs, and gifts of every sort, but Freedom of Choice, unfortunately, does not mean that you may choose a book of stories by Anton Chekhov, the greatest story writer of all time, for there ain't a one to be found down any corridor.

There are three bookstores in the miraculous, modern Yorkdale Shopping Centre — Coles, W.H. Smith, and Lichtman's — and although they all carry the works of such great authors as Danielle Steele and Jackie Collins, not one of these stores has a single, solitary collection of stories by Anton Chekhov. If you don't believe me, go and look for yourself. It will do you no good. But you will gain some insight into what the world is turning into. You might ask the bookstore clerks about...you know what...but you will be told that the buyers for these chains do their ordering from a central office.

MIRACLES * THE FUTURE * FREEDOM OF CHOICE!

You can buy an assortment of fruit-flavored bubble baths at The Body Shop for only \$17.65. You can spend \$99.99 for a

skateboard or \$24.99 for an anti-theft device for your skis at Collegiate Sports. At Club Monaco you can buy authentic Club Monaco jeans for a mere \$49. And at Classic China you can get a lovely bone china chipmunk for \$95. But nowhere in this Mecca of Mass Merchandising can you acquire a book of stories by the great Russian author Anton Chekhov, the greatest writer of stories who ever lived.

At Caraways Delicatessen you can spend \$4.75 on a jar of Sable & Rosenfeld Tarragon Mayonnaise. At the Steak Shop you can order a dozen 4-ounce bacon-wrapped filet mignons for \$26.95 or a tray of 49 hors d'oeuvres for \$22. And at Tip Top Gourmet Foods you can get Neo-Baldrian Liquid, the "old European herbal remedy used for generations as a natural source aid to SLEEP and RELAXATION" — price, only \$5.39 for a 100-ml bottle. But neither bribery nor threats nor appeals to reason will squeeze a book of stories by Chekhov out of the magnificent Rock of the Modern Age known as Yorkdale Shopping Centre.

For \$25.99 you can have a set of three nickel-tungsten darts at Hobby Hut (dartboard sold separately). For \$19.99 you can obtain an ice cream cone maker for use in a microwave oven at the Micro Cooking Centre. For \$9.99 you can buy an "electric deodorant diffuser" at Pro Hardware. You plug it into a wall socket, and it diffuses deodorant for six hours. Meanwhile, at Music World you can buy Wayne Gretzky's videotape *Hockey My Way* for \$39.95. But if Anton Chekhov came back from the dead to see for himself how the future had unfolded, he would not find a single one of his books anywhere in Yorkdale Shopping Centre, located in suburban Toronto, conveniently close to Highway 401 (ample parking on two levels).

At Bowring you can get a bellows for your fireplace for \$49.95; the brass rack for the bellows is only \$89.95. Naturally, you need the rack to put the bellows in and vice-versa. At Ostranders Jewellers you can get a lovely hand-painted stonecraft rabbit for \$139.95. At Distinctive Gifts you can get a bottle opener shaped like a moose for \$3.95 and a sculpted bear with a disproportionately large fish in its mouth — in authentic Canadian red cedar — for \$139. Don't forget a tube of moustache wax at Gentlemen's Court for only \$6.98. Do forget about the works of Anton Chekhov, author of such magnificent stories as "Ward Six" and "In the Ravine". There's just no demand for them in these parts.

At the whimsical Razz 'm Tazz you can spend \$4.99 for a box of a dozen Toilet Targets for peeing on in your toilet, and there is a molded rubber ice bucket shaped like a toilet for \$19.99. At the elegant Crabtree & Evelyn (New York * London * Paris) you can buy 4 grams of bay leaves in a nice bottle for \$2.75, a 6.2-ounce package of raspberry chocolate crisps for \$9.95 (more than the average monthly income in most of Africa), and a 1/4-ounce tube of sandalwood shaving cream for only \$2.95. But no amount of wishful thinking will get you any edition — hardcover or paperback — of stories by Anton Chekhov, the son of a small shopkeeper, the grandson of a serf, holder of a medical degree, and winner of the Pushkin Prize in 1888 for the collection *In the Twilight*.

The Bombay Company has a little wooden needlepoint table for \$45. Grand & Toy has a Humector (for moistening envelopes) for \$2.98. The Key Man has an electric windshield scraper for \$9.99 (plugs into the cigarette lighter of your car). Junors has a set of six little knives for opening clams for \$15.98, a salad dryer for \$7.99, and a porcelain scotch tape dispenser in the shape of a duck for \$15.98. And Birks has a hand-cut lead crystal atomizer (made in Czechoslovakia) for \$50. But nobody in Yorkdale has a book of stories by Chekhov for *any* amount of money.

Shoppers Drug Mart has *156 different kinds of shampoo*. Are we not blessed to live in such a wonderful world? Get down on your knees and thank God at once.

Kresge's has the top ten albums on record or cassette for \$8.99 or less, including Madonna, Corey Hart, and Don Johnson, and broken brand-name candy bars in bulk at \$2.99 a pound, and at their lunch counter you can nourish your body with a meal of fried liver, whipped potatoes, and vegetable for only \$2.89. But you cannot nourish your soul with the works of you-know-who.

You can shape up at the Holiday Fitness Centre (Co-ed Aerobics, Ballet/Jazz, Nautilus '86, Eagle Equipment, Jogging Tracks, Computerized Liferower Machines, Swimming Pools, Saunas, Co-ed Steamrooms, Whirlpools, Professional Squash Coach, Pro Shops, Masseur, Child Care, Fully Licensed Restaurants, and More, More, More...Facilities vary from location to location). Laura Secord presents their European Collection (Tulip, Mont Blanc, Cameo, Strawberry Mousse, Chocolate Creme Mousse, Hazelnut Creme, and Fruit Cordial), but you can settle

for little marshmallow Santas. Carole's Cheesecake has 50 different flavors of cake, from \$1.90 a slice or from \$10.95 a small cake. And the government liquor store has three different melon-flavored liqueurs. But the entire Yorkdale Shopping Centre has zero varieties of books by Anton Chekhov, the world's greatest author of stories.

Jack Fraser has colorful boxer shorts for only \$7.50. Calderone has hiking shoes for \$195, which are probably no more serviceable than the ones at Bata for \$39.99, but the modern shopper can tell the difference even if I can't. Sox sells Alfred Sung sox (socks) for \$8.50 (Buy Canadian). At Marks & Spencer you can get authentic English-style pork pies for \$4.99 and authentic Scottish-style kilts for \$59.99. At Holt Renfrew "The Erno Laszlo Discovery Kit is yours for \$85 while quantities last (Ask our consultant for details)." At the United Cigar Store you can obtain the London *Sunday Mirror* for \$1.95, a gumball machine for \$24.99, Whiz cigar holders (for all types of cigars) for \$1.99, and 22 ounces of "Vintage Popping Corn" in a champagne-type bottle for only \$9.99. But nowhere in this Mass Market of Muck can you find one piddling little book of stories by Chekhov.

DISCOVER THE FEELING * SHARE THE EXPERIENCE *
CLIMATE-CONTROLLED SHOPPING AT YOUR FINGERTIPS *
VALUE DAYS ARE HERE * UNBEATABLE SELECTION *
SANITARY WASHROOMS * THE EIGHTH WONDER OF THE
WORLD * MIRACLES!

At P.J.'s Pet Centre gold skinks are \$39.99 each or \$59.99 a pair (male & female), and there are 20 different rawhide toys for dogs to chew on, including baseballs at \$4.69. At Yorkdale Florist the Aloe Vera (see shampoos at Shoppers Drug Mart) is only \$4.95. At Radio Shack a two-sound electronic siren is only \$29.95. At Lighting Unlimited a large chandelier is only \$3,495 (light bulbs not included). At Picture This framed prints of sports cars, such as the Porsche convertible and the Lamborghini Countach, are only \$49.95, and a variety of framed reproductions of the paintings of Robert Bateman sell for only \$59.95. In this milieu the works of Anton Chekhov are to be despised. What censorship accomplishes in other countries, the simple forces of the market place accomplish in this one.

If you feel faint — of course, I meant to say *overwhelmed* — you may sit beside a fountain flanked by several *bona fide* palm trees and contemplate Dream Shoppe Lingerie and the

mannequins of Mary Morra, Alton Lewis, and Merino. Or you may wander over to Bikini Village, which has more bikinis than the number of secret fantasies in a crowded subway car during the evening rush hour. The mannequin in the window of Bikini Village has a TV monitor instead of a head, but there is no picture, just static. This may or may not mean something.

You have not even ventured yet into the two great department stores, Eaton's and Simpsons. Both of them have book departments, as a token concession to literacy, but don't even think of asking for the collected stories of Anton Chekhov, for your tired heart will be broken irreparably. The well-groomed clerks will look at you dumbly for a moment and then reply, "Whatever's there."

Whatever's there. In this Massive Monolith of Mammon, this Macroscopic Monument to Mediocrity, whatever's there is whatever's there, and *you*, you stupid son of a bitch, ought to know that by now! DEMOCRACY IN ACTION * THE WILL OF THE MAJORITY * 50 DIFFERENT FLAVORS * GET SOME NOW * BARGAINS * THE NINTH, TENTH, AND ELEVENTH WONDERS OF THE WORLD * FORGIVE ANY INCONVENIENCE DURING EXPANSION * IMPROVED ACCESS FOR WHEELCHAIRS * THANK YOU FOR SHOPPING AT YORKDALE * THE WORLD AT YOUR DOORSTEP * WE'RE ALL THERE FOR YOU * FEEL THE EXCITEMENT * PARADISE * YOU CAN'T DIE * THIS WAY TO SUBWAY.

It's back to the subway via the enclosed walkway, without Anton Chekhov. The rain is still coming down. The city is beoming more and more enclosed. If one is sufficiently clever and well off, it is already possible to get about from home to work to shopping without ever actually being out of doors. In the future, only the lowest class of city dwellers will need overcoats, umbrellas, and boots. The future belongs to brave boys and girls who, in the words of the prophet, "aren't afraid to live in tubes and push buttons!"

A Moment of Silence for Man Ray

I was in my car on my way to work when I heard that Man Ray had died. Hearing his name uttered over the radio jolted me, as though a great secret were being revealed to an ignorant world. I wanted the whole world to stop for just a minute — cars, buses, pedestrians, everyone.

I thought of *Observatory Time*, with giant red lips floating detached over a horizon punctuated by a small observatory. I thought of *The Infinite Man* striding boldly through an arcade, his feet upon infinity symbols. I thought of the flatiron with tacks on the bottom, called *Gift*. And I thought of the drawing of a spider weaving a web between a pair of hands held slightly apart. What patience, what sensitivity, what love is demanded of the artist! — so much that a spider could build a web in his hands.

I had to do something, say something to my co-workers. I was bursting — not with grief, but with the long-suppressed need to share something personal and deep with some of them. I had worked in the warehouse of F. Company for several months without telling anyone the private details of my life — my writing, education, or previous jobs. Experience had taught me that one pays a price for speaking of such things in the wrong places. Among average people you must be average too or every day among them will be a battle. Here I had so far avoided my previous mistakes. For eight hours a day I was another nobody

in the warehouse, picking orders for books and performing tasks demanding no particular skill or learning. I worked with people who knew books only as objects to be checked, counted, packed in boxes, and shipped to customers. Some of them could barely read, and one person was completely illiterate. In such a place, just to be seen reading during my breaks was all the risk I cared to take.

I walked through the rows of metal bins to my work area. The bell had not yet rung, so I walked over to the shipper's counter, where Peter, a young Newfie, was drawing a cartoon on brown wrapping paper. Most of the time he annoyed me with his childish antics, such as speeding around corners on his roller skates, making a sound like a police siren. But he had a flair for creating objects out of paper and cardboard. And the drawing of a horse and cowboy in a corral that he was now doing was probably better than I could do.

Now it was time for the cowboy to say something. Peter drew a word balloon with the words "Down boy!"

"You should have the horse saying something," I suggested.

"Yeah? Like what?"

"How about 'I would like a cheese sandwich, sir.'"

Peter accepted this without hesitation and wrote it in. He misspelled "sandwich" as "sandwitch." I didn't bother to correct him. That done, he read the cartoon aloud. We both found it funny.

The bell rang, and I started to pick orders, but my mind was on telling someone, even if it meant making a fool of myself.

I walked over to John's area. He was nineteen and had finished high school. He said good morning, and I mumbled something about not being sure how good it was. How come? And then I spilled it. Like a goddamned idiot, I actually said, "A great man has died, but I don't think you ever heard of him."

"Who?"

"Man Ray," I said. He repeated the name as a question, looking amused, sucking on the end of his pencil. I had to explain. "He was a great artist."

What was I expecting? Should John have covered his face in despair? Should he have fervently begged to know everything about Man Ray? Should he have made some appropriate gesture in honor of the dead?

I had made a mistake but was not content to leave it at that. I went over to Raj, a Trinidadian who ran the paperback section of the warehouse. His favorite all-purpose expletive was "All right!" which, accompanied by an indefinite smile, effectively lubricated his every social interaction. When I told him Man Ray had died, he asked me, "Who's that, Elizabeth Ray's father?"

"No, an artist. One of the greatest."

"Yeah? All right!"

Every Thursday after morning break we had our weekly warehouse meeting, designed to give the peons brief relief from their feelings of bondage to the company. Today there was good news. We had been spewing book-objects off the dock at such a tremendous rate, it was a cinch we'd meet our November quota. This would give us a Friday afternoon off in December as a reward.

Kirk, the foreman, said he was "working on" our raises, and we should get them by the first of the year. Several of the guys began chanting in jest, "We want more money! We want more money!" People in the second-floor offices parted their curtains to see what was happening.

We also learned that the computer that had come out of the clouds to save us had done three weeks of trial runs without a mistake. I had gone three weeks without a mistake but never thought it was a reason for celebration.

I went off by myself later and leaned against a bin. I was thinking about Man Ray and that I was possibly the only human being within a fifty-mile radius who was at that moment putting work aside to think about him. It made me feel special. Perhaps someday when I died another person in a warehouse would pause and think of me. But I didn't seriously believe it. A publisher I'd worked for in the States — a man who knew the world and people better than anyone else I'd ever known — once said to me in the course of a private conversation, "I just spoke to this guy on the phone whose poems you liked so much. I told him no matter how good his poems were, they'd have about as much

impact on the world as a feather falling into the Grand Canyon." I had taken that thought home with me that night, locked my door, and sulked. I figured he was trying to tell me something.

I ate my lunch quickly in the cafeteria, then returned to the warehouse to sit alone and read. I was reading *Plexus*, Henry Miller's book about his early years as a writer. Then the canned music snapped on overhead, pouring over me like marshmallow puke. I had once complained about it at a weekly meeting, and the others had looked at me strangely. On another occasion I had brought in my radio and turned on an FM station while I was sitting with some of the guys around the card table. The station was playing Mendelssohn's *Reformation Symphony*. Somebody said it was shit, and the others laughed. From that day on, I sat by myself and read.

The boss's daughter was watching me out of the corner of her eye. She was a temperamental girl who had hated my guts from the beginning, for no reason I could think of. I would say good morning to her, and she would turn her back to me and walk away. Or when I needed to look up a bin number in the print-out, she'd tell me to wait till she was good and ready.

Recently she'd been less nasty. On impulse, I went over and asked her if she had ever heard of Man Ray. *Had I made up that name? An artist? Anything like the Group of Seven? What exactly was surrealism anyway?* The questions and answers didn't matter. The real meaning of the conversation was that we were talking and being civil. It seemed more than I could have hoped for. A few more dead artists and she might even ask for a ride home.

But the girl I really liked was the one in Promotion. She was an American, and since she came from Philadelphia, I thought she must have heard of Man Ray. And if she had, then I would have found a like-minded person in this place. Already I was picturing a beautiful romance.

I had my eye on her office frequently, and when she finally came down through the warehouse on an errand, I stopped her and said, "Do you know who died? Man Ray."

"Man Ray died? You're kidding. I didn't hear."

"Yesterday. I heard it on the radio this morning. Say, you're the only other person here who knows who he was."

She smiled. "Of course I've heard of Man Ray. My husband's a photographer."

"Oh....I see."

The rest of F. Company would remember this day because somebody set off a stink bomb in one of the washrooms. The smell of hydrogen sulfide was all over the building. Our foreman, the maintenance man, and a couple of grey-haired, grey-suited managers walked around trying to locate the source. What they could have done had they found it, I don't know. The maintenance man sprayed the washrooms with air freshener and let the fans ventilate them, but the smell lingered all day. You had to hold your breath to go in and take a leak. How this incident fitted into the great scheme of things remains a mystery to me.

I worked on my own the rest of the day, not speaking to anyone. I spent the last two hours with the "Cannot Locate" folder, into which the pickers threw their problems for somebody else to worry about. I've always had an attraction to mental challenges, so this problem file seemed to devolve to me naturally. I took these loose ends of an otherwise perfect system and visited various recondite places in the warehouse known only to the initiated. I found about a third of the books. The rest of the problems would go back into the repository of Mystery, where they would probably remain long after my departure from the company. There's only so much one man can do.

The close of the day was marked by a growing dismallness outside. November is a cloudy, gloomy month in Toronto. How I would have loved a bath of orange light from the setting sun as we moved toward the punch clock. I love to look into the sun when it is low and orange and seemingly solid, when it can best be appreciated and wondered at for a while. But the sky was a darkening sheet when the clock released us back into the world, to our private lives and thoughts.

The headlights of cars bumper to bumper on the boulevard were the funeral procession for another day thrown onto the trash heap of history. It was not surreal. It was as real as the hunger and the habit that anchored us to our work.

I had wasted several weeks doing nothing, but I did not waste that evening. I had to record what would otherwise have died with me. I sat at the unpainted desk that faced the basement wall and gave a moment of silence to Man Ray. And as long as I was alive, one to myself too.

The Simplified Existence of Mr. Duggins

This is the story of a man not so different from you or me. You might well have sat next to him on a bus or ridden up with him in an elevator. You might have crossed his path any number of times without taking any notice of him, for there was nothing in his appearance to make him conspicuous. Neither was there anything in his character to set him apart from his fellow man. In such beings, wilful action is often fatal. The lofty intention born in the mind that is unused to it often goes awry.

So, dear reader, I remind you of the classic dictum that until a man knows himself, he knows nothing. I also offer a dictum of my own: nothing and no one should be taken too seriously. That said, I invite you to sit back and partake of this little tale.

Mr. Duggins was a quiet forty-year-old bachelor who worked in an office in a tall building. He spent his entire day at a desk handling papers having to do with imports and exports — a dull job but one to which he was well suited by temperament and aptitude. Mr. Duggins was not a particularly exciting or imaginative fellow, and he had never had an original idea in his life. He enjoyed working with numbers and was at his best when tackling minute details. He earned an average salary for his position and lived in comfortable and conventional circum-

stances. He was a man not given to extremes, either in his tastes or his habits or his opinions. His favorite suits were his grey ones.

In the office where Mr. Duggins worked, there was a lovely lady named Sandra, a winsome blonde whom Mr. Duggins had secretly adored for a long time. Being shy by nature, he was intimidated by her outgoing manner, as well as by her beauty, and he took it for granted that she had too many men in her life to take the slightest interest in him. Occasionally, he tried to impress her by wearing a tie that he considered daring — that is to say, dark blue or perhaps indigo — but these efforts went unnoticed by her.

Toward the end of October, with a mild fall still holding out against the onset of winter, Sandra decided to have a little party at home — a soiree, she called it — with all the people in the office as guests. Mr. Duggins was thrilled when she asked him if he could come. He said yes at once.

When the glorious evening arrived, Mr. Duggins presented himself at the door of Sandra's apartment in his best grey suit and indigo tie. "Come in!" said Sandra in her most winsome voice, and Mr. Duggins felt that never in the history of the human race had anyone spoken those words in such a charming way.

He accepted a drink and sat at one end of the sofa, from which vantage point he could observe his goddess. He had hardly wet his lips when the stranger appeared — a handsome, bearded young man about 25, in jeans and pullover, who emerged from the kitchen with a tray of snacks. Mr. Duggins heard Sandra address him as Ray, and from the looks of it, they were on close terms. Mr. Duggins was jealous. And being a shy man by nature, as already noted, he withdrew into a shell, hoping that Ray would do or say something foolish that would lower Sandra's regard for him. Perhaps he would say something erroneous about imports and exports. But no, Ray was perfectly charming and at ease and was never at a loss for words.

Mr. Duggins watched Sandra's eyes carefully all evening — how she looked at Ray — and he decided that she was probably a lost cause. When he heard Ray say to another guest, "Sandra's putting me up for a few days before I head back to California," Mr. Duggins felt a knife in his heart. *They must be sleeping together!*

His jealousy increased as Ray talked with several guests about his world travels. He had been everywhere, it seemed — Morocco, Afghanistan, Tibet, Peru, Norway, Rhodesia, Madagas-

car, Saudi Arabia, Poughkeepsie, and on and on. "And all I had was my knapsack, with everything I owned in it," he said nonchalantly. *Impossible*, thought Mr. Duggins, who couldn't even visit his maiden aunt in Niagara Falls without taking two suitcases.

Not only had Ray been almost everywhere, he also seemed to know almost everything. He destroyed the supernatural conception of God. He proved the superiority of communal living. He was on the verge of putting together the Unified Field Theory, whatever that was. He could grow prize-winning cucumbers. And he had stayed in a sheik's tent for a weekend and learned the deepest secrets of sex. All this made Mr. Duggins feel hopelessly stupid and unworldly.

By late in the evening the guests were starting to leave, but Mr. Duggins remained, hoping yet for some sort of encouraging sign or turn of events. He was among the small, privileged audience that surrounded Ray, hanging on his every word. Sandra's adoring attention had not diminished in the least, and Mr. Duggins, thinking he could stand no more, found an opportunity to speak. "But really, I don't see how you could carry everything you own on your back," he said politely. "I don't see how anyone can live that simply unless he has to because he's poor."

Ray now turned to face him, even adjusting his chair slightly, and smiled condescendingly. "The concept of private property is obsolete," he announced. "What has modern man become? A system that accumulates material things for a lifetime, like a heavy mass that attracts debris by gravitation. And that is the trap! We are weighed down by what we own. Our possessions enslave us by their very weight. Just think of all that *you* own," said Ray, pointing an accusing finger. "A television?"

"Yes," confessed Mr. Duggins.

"A stereo?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"Furniture?"

"Of course, but —"

"A closet full of clothing?"

"Uh, yes."

"Kitchen appliances? A vacuum cleaner? Books? Records? Miscellaneous articles of every variety?"

"I suppose."

"Think of it, man!" said Ray with some heat. "What is your life but an accumulation of *things, objects, dead weight!*"

All eyes were now on Mr. Duggins, the unmasked social criminal. "Well...I never looked at it that way," he said, embarrassed. It did not occur to him to point out that Sandra had all those things, too, but Ray wasn't picking on her. Indeed, Sandra seemed to look at Ray more lovingly than ever. Mr. Duggins was totally nonplussed.

Ray now picked up a guitar from beside his chair and began strumming random chords as a bit of exercise between his pearls of wisdom. "Have you ever *really* listened to the wind?" No, Mr. Duggins had not. "You can learn a lot from the wind." *Strum, strum.* "Have you ever gazed upon the ruins of a lost civilization?" *Strum.* "Or made love in a meadow in the south of France?" Mr. Duggins blushed. "Have you ever literally *thrown* yourself into the unknown, with nothing but a knapsack on your back and your own intelligence?" *Strum.* "And maybe your guitar, heh, heh." *Strum, strum.* Mr. Duggins didn't even attempt to answer. "Only when you have simplified your life to absolute simplicity can you *really* be free, and only then can you *really* begin to live." *Strum.* His audience was eating it up.

"I think that's wonderful!" exclaimed Sandra with great emotion. "Don't you, George?"

"Yes," lied Mr. Duggins. "But...what I don't quite see is..."

"What don't you see?" asked Ray, smiling with superiority.

"Well, how do you eat? How do you support yourself?"

To this, Ray replied with laughter and put his guitar aside. Mr. Duggins understood that he had asked an exceedingly stupid question. "Somehow, I always manage to eat," said Ray, still smiling as he began playing with his well-developed beard. "Perhaps I pick berries. Perhaps I catch a fish. Perhaps someone takes me in and feeds me." Mr. Duggins noticed Sandra react to this with a slight pursing of the lips, denoting mild embarrassment. "As for money, I need very little. Almost nothing. But *you*, on the other hand..." He pointed his finger at Mr. Duggins. "*You*," he repeated, "are a victim of conditioning. You are so conditioned to see life only as a material problem. Everything must cost something. That's the trouble with your generation. It's really sick with chasing after money!" Ray now looked disgusted, and he picked up the guitar again and worked out his hostility on its strings for a few seconds. Then he stopped and looked at Mr.

Duggins with excessive politeness. "Look, have you ever read *Walden*, by Thoreau?"

"No," said Mr. Duggins, who had not even heard of it.

"Well, just read it. It explains it all better than I can."

"I read it!" said Sandra. "A long time ago! I just loved it! Really, George, you should read it! It's wonderful!"

Mr. Duggins felt demoralized. "Could you write it down for me?" he asked Ray. "I'll get a copy."

"Of course. I'd be glad to," said Ray. He wrote down the title and author in the plainest possible printing so that even a moron like Mr. Duggins could read it.

After a decent interval, Mr. Duggins bade his farewells and left, thus bringing to an end possibly the most miserable evening of his life.

On his way home, he mulled over everything that Ray had said and decided it must all be true because he was so charismatic and handsome and musical and because Sandra approved of him so completely, while he, George Duggins, had never seen any ruins, or stayed in a sheik's tent, or made love in a meadow, or done all that other stuff. And as for learning from the wind, Mr. Duggins had to admit to himself that in all his forty years on this planet he had not learned one single, solitary thing from the wind! He now realized what a pathetic blockhead he was. Without a doubt, that's what Sandra thought of him.

When he arrived home, he looked all around him, surveying all the things he owned, things that now brought him no comfort or pleasure. *Yes, I am a slave to material things*, he told himself sadly.

And so Mr. Duggins slept badly that night in his soft, warm bed, thinking about the horrible dead things that cluttered his life but wondering at the same time whether he could change himself for the better.

Of all those who had attended Sandra's little party, only Mr. Duggins seemed to take the events of the evening to heart. Everyone else looked and acted exactly the same as they always had. Office conversation did not become any more idealistic. People went about their materialistic jobs with the same seriousness. Even Sandra was her usual self, except that Mr. Duggins thought she acted a little cooler toward him. He interpreted this in the worst possible light.

During his lunch hour, Mr. Duggins went down to the bookstore in the mall, handed the slip of paper to a clerk, and asked if she had that book. He looked for some sign of admiration on her face, or any reaction at all, but the clerk merely went to the literature section, located the book, brought it back to the register, and wrapped it up for him.

Over the next five or six days, Mr. Duggins read *Walden*, by Henry David Thoreau. He read it during his breaks. No one in the office noticed. He read it on the subway. No one around him reacted in any way. He read it at home in bed. He found it a very strange book, unlike anything he had ever read before, for it had *deep ideas* in it. And when he had finished it, he felt deeply troubled, for his way of life was exactly the opposite of the author's. And since the author was revered as a great man, what conclusion had to be drawn?

From then on, Mr. Duggins accepted his pay cheque with a sense of guilt. He felt foolish doing his usual paperwork on imports and exports. He observed his co-workers with a vague feeling of contempt. And he suffered claustrophobia in the elevator and on the subway as he merged into the daily ebb and flow of the tide of humanity. When he returned to his apartment, he saw dead objects crying out for dusting and maintenance. And when he thought of the vagabond Ray traipsing across a meadow with a knapsack and settling down amidst the flowers to make love with Sandra (or someone like her), his heart was filled with jealousy and self-loathing.

His co-workers failed to notice the slackness and moodiness that now seemed to dominate his working hours, nor had they any idea of the inner turmoil that caused him many sleepless nights.

It was on one such sleepless night that Mr. Duggins was struck by The Great Idea. It was this: he would simplify his life! He would divest himself of his personal property until, like Ray or Thoreau, he could carry all that he owned on his back.

To do this in one fell swoop would be impossible. Mr. Duggins knew he could not step from one mode of life to another as one stepped from one room to another. No. The divestiture would have to be carried out in small steps until the desired end was reached.

As a beginning, Mr. Duggins decided he would weigh everything he owned — quite literally, on a scale — just to see

how matters stood on Day One of The Great Plan. And so the next day he procured a bathroom scale, which he did not have, as well as a postage scale. He did not like the idea of acquiring two new things on the day he had resolved to start getting rid of things, but he promised himself that he would make up for it.

On Saturday morning he began. He took a cardboard box and weighed it. It weighed 15 ounces. He made a note of it on a yellow legal pad: *tare wt. — 15 oz.* Then he filled the box with the contents of the top drawer and part of the second drawer of his dresser, weighed it, and duly noted the weight. The process continued in this way, boxful by boxful, room by room, leaving nothing out — not a pin, not a pencil, not a post card, not a potted cactus. Some large items went directly on the scale, and some small items went on the postage scale to satisfy Mr. Duggins's curiosity and his mania for numbers.

The clothing alone was a shock — well over 200 pounds, including the shoes. Why, the ties alone weighed nearly two pounds! Nine pounds of underwear struck him as positively obscene. And a six-ounce pair of gloves seemed insidious.

It was the little things that bedeviled him most, things like pens and flints and rubber bands and dice and buttons and scraps of things that one wouldn't think of as weighing anything but which assuredly did. *Twenty-four ounces of pens and pencils! My God!* moaned Mr. Duggins to himself. Even his money had weight — his bank book, his cash, the jar of pennies on the dresser!

The records were bad news — well over a hundred pounds. Why a single album weighed half a pound! He knew he would have to get rid of some of them, but when he flipped through his collection he felt a special fondness for each one, even those he no longer listened to.

The books and magazines were less of a problem, for Mr. Duggins was not much of a reader. What he had could be disposed of without too much pain. Well, maybe he'd save the *Playboys* for last.

The kitchen presented a special problem: should he weigh the food in the refrigerator? Yes, he decided he must. And he resolved that henceforth he would purchase foodstuffs only in the smallest available packages. He considered the ice cube tray. Now, here was a puzzler. Did it count or didn't it? After long consideration, he decided the ice cube tray was exempt since it

came with the fridge, and the fridge came with the apartment. But the garbage in the pail under the sink had to be weighed. After all, it belonged to him, and he was imposing the strictest clerical accuracy on himself.

In the bathroom, everything but the soap by the sink, the shower curtain, and the toilet paper in the roller had to be weighed. Those items were exempt because they would be left behind if he were ever to vacate the apartment. He nearly forgot the laundry in the hamper. When he weighed it, he made a note on his pad: *Damp Weight. Reweigh when clean and dry.*

Now the job got really heavy because he still had to weigh the furniture. He realized he couldn't weigh it on the bathroom scale. He sat down and thought about this in his most systematic, clerical manner, and before too long he had the solution: buy three more scales and weigh the furniture on its corners.

So Mr. Duggins went out and bought three more scales — an additional weight, which he regretted, but one that was unavoidable. Now he could weigh even the bulkiest piece of furniture with ease. The total furniture weight was a shock: 1,622 pounds. This included a large framed black velvet matador obtained at a flea market, the living room carpet (rolled up and tossed on the bed), and his favorite placemats on the kitchen table (*Papal Visit — 1984*).

The process of weighing his physical existence took Mr. Duggins a complete day, at the end of which he was exhausted. The final total was a staggering 2,561 pounds and 4 ounces. Not counting Mr. Duggins himself, that is. As an afterthought, he weighed himself: 160 pounds. This was excessive, he decided. He could lose a few pounds and probably be better off for it.

According to The Great Plan, every day, in some way, Mr. Duggins would reduce his total weight, and he would keep at it until he had become as simple and lightweight as he could be. And so he fixed meals using up odd foodstuffs that he would not replenish — anchovies, stuffed olives, barbecue sauce, grated cheese, green Maraschino cherries, and so forth. He smoked the last of his cigarettes and vowed to give up smoking. He spent several evenings by candlelight so as to use up two decorative candles he'd been given as gifts. He hadn't the conscience to throw them out. No. If something could be used up legitimately, it would be used up. Everything that went had to go in a reasonable way. At least for now.

Mr. Duggins soon learned that the natural tendency of his total weight was to increase rather than decrease. Every time he bought groceries or the least little thing, he became heavier. If he broke a bill and got back change, the coins weighed more than the bill. What Ray had said was true: Man was a system that accumulated weight. Mr. Duggins now dreaded buying anything at all.

The mail was particularly vexing. Every time the mail arrived, new weight would be added to his life. So he spent many hours cancelling subscriptions, paying off credit cards, and removing his name from mailing lists. He ceased writing to the few people he wrote to so as not to receive replies.

Mr. Duggins's early efforts were disappointing. In the first week of his Great Plan, he reduced his life's weight by only 10 pounds, 2 ounces. Clearly, he would have to be a little bolder.

He took his books to a second-hand bookstore and sold them. He changed his pennies into folding money. He deposited some of his clothing in the St. Vincent De Paul drop box next to the supermarket. He pawned his camera and a clock radio. With each divestiture he subtracted the weight. After the second week, he had made some progress, but not a lot. He told himself that his mind had not yet shaken off its materialistic conditioning. He was like a fearful new swimmer not willing to leave the shallow end of the pool.

One morning at work he was called into the manager's office to explain why certain forms had been marked in faint green ink. Mr. Duggins replied that he was using up his own stockpile of pens and that his green felt-tip pen, which was close to being exhausted, could be used up quickly and thus rid him of one-third of an ounce, and, furthermore, he was saving the company some money by bringing in his personal stationery items from home — pens, paper clips, staples, and so forth. The manager gave Mr. Duggins a long, serious look. "Are you feeling all right?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," replied Mr. Duggins.

From then on, Mr. Duggins was watched very carefully at work. The word had gotten around that he had become "peculiar," and those who hadn't noticed it before now did. For instance, he had been wearing the same suit and tie every day for

at least a week, and when a co-worker remarked on it, he replied cryptically, "Beware of enterprises that require new clothes."

"What do you mean?"

"It's something Thoreau said."

Mr. Duggins began showing his pique around the office and quoted Thoreau frequently. "The masses of men lead lives of quiet desperation," he said. And such remarks naturally led to some ill feelings.

"There's nothing desperate about *my* life."

"Yes, there is. We're *all* leading desperate lives. We're preoccupied with foolish material things."

"Like what?"

"Like imports and exports. What does Korea have to sell us that we really need, or vice-versa?"

It did not take long for this sort of talk to reach the wrong ears, and Mr. Duggins soon found himself in his manager's office declaiming against materialism and the function of the company itself.

"Well, if you really feel that way, George, why don't you leave?" asked the manager. "Nobody's forcing you to work here."

For George Duggins, ennobled by his Great Idea, the die had been cast long ago. "Yes, I believe I should leave," he said with uncharacteristic firmness.

"Very well. I'll get your papers in order," said the manager calmly and without rancor.

And that was how Mr. Duggins talked himself out of his job. But that evening, he decided that Fate had done him a good turn, for his job was his greatest tie to the material world, and henceforth he could get serious about simplifying his life. His only regret was that he could not say goodbye properly to Sandra because she was absent. But then, perhaps that was Fate, too. Perhaps he had been saved some sort of embarrassment.

November was now drawing to a close. The month of November was the gloomiest — worse than mid-winter — and Mr. Duggins found himself battling melancholia. *A change of life is always painful*, he reasoned, although this was the first time he had ever changed it.

With his job gone, Mr. Duggins's social circle — such as it was — was gone, too. This was all for the best, he decided,

because those people were tied to the materialistic life, and if he kept seeing them, they would only try to dissuade him from his Great Plan. He thought there was something heroic about going it alone. One had to be single-minded, idealistic, unafraid to take risks — just like Thoreau.

Mr. Duggins's life still weighed over a ton. "This won't do," he said, walking through his rooms and surveying his collection of dead objects. "I've got to get that weight down."

He placed the following classified ad in the paper: "*Contents of apartment. Everything must go. Bargain prices.*"

The ad ran for three days, and the response was excellent. A young couple inquired about the bed. "How much?" asked the man.

"Oh, name your price," said Mr. Duggins.

"Hundred bucks," said the man, half in jest.

"Okay," said Mr. Duggins.

The man looked at his wife, then at Mr. Duggins. "Take a cheque?"

"Sure," said Mr. Duggins.

The man pulled out his cheque book and began writing the cheque. "I can show you my driver's license if you want."

"It's okay. It's not necessary."

This happened several times. The prices were consistently ridiculous. One well-dressed lady gave him a sympathetic look and asked if he was in trouble. Mr. Duggins replied that he was leaving the country. He was going to India to study under a guru and was never coming back. "Oh! I think that's wonderful!" said the lady gushingly and promptly snatched up a glass-topped table, a decorative lamp, the living room sofa, the television, the vacuum cleaner, and a bookcase for a total of \$200. Mr. Duggins threw in a few little items for free. The lady's uniformed chauffeur and another man arrived later in a panel truck to haul away the goods.

Everything that Mr. Duggins had hoped to sell got sold. The last customer to arrive, a Pakistani, found nothing of any consequence left, but Mr. Duggins thrust a large cardboard box on him containing kitchen utensils, tools, a flashlight, a small steam iron, a shoe polishing kit, some cleaning items, a new sheet in its original package, and an old electric shaver. "I don't really need these things," said the man.

"Ten dollars," said Mr. Duggins.

"In that case, I'll take them. Thank you very much."

As the Pakistani was carrying his bargain box away, the superintendent of the building appeared and knocked on Mr. Duggins's open door. "Hi, there. What's going on?"

"Oh! Mr. Bayer. I, uh, I'm going to be leaving soon." And Mr. Duggins, who had not actually thought about it, suddenly realized that this was the next inevitable step.

The superintendent, a canny German who could install a toilet in the dark, rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Where you going?"

"Oh, well, I haven't actually found a place yet, but I'm sure I will before long."

"But why sell all your furniture?"

"Why? Why sell the, uh, furniture?"

"Yeah."

"Because, heh, heh...Well, it's hard to explain."

Mr. Bayer approached his tenant, hands in pockets, and asked softly, "Some kind of trouble? Money trouble? You can tell me."

"Oh, no, nothing like that, heh, heh."

"It's okay, you don't have to explain. But you've got a lease, you know."

"Uh, yes, I suppose I do."

"Well...We can break it. Nobody wants to create a hardship for a tenant if he's in a jam. Still, you should've let me know."

"Yes, I'm sorry. I should have."

"There's a small administration fee for breaking the lease."

"Yes, that's fine. I understand."

Mr. Bayer looked around the almost empty apartment, discreetly looking for signs of damage. There weren't any. "Well, let me know when you expect to leave."

"Yes, I certainly will, Mr. Bayer."

The superintendent left, closing the door behind him.

Mr. Duggins made an instant coffee and sat down on his one remaining kitchen chair before a little plastic table formerly used for his phone and phone book, which now rested on the floor. Yes, there was no avoiding it: he would have to move. Besides, what would be the point of paying a lot of rent on an empty apartment?

The apartment was not totally empty but close to it. To replace his large, comfortable bed, Mr. Duggins had resurrected

a folding cot from his closet that he hadn't used for years. Its thin foam cushion was in bad condition. He had saved one pillow, one pillow case, one sheet, and one blanket of medium weight. He had sold all but one face towel, one bath towel, and one wash cloth.

Everything from the kitchen had gone except for one complete table setting and the minimum number of utensils he could get by with.

He still had a lot of clothing, for which he felt guilty, plus a trunk and some luggage. And he still had all the little personal things that would have been of no interest or value to anyone else.

The total receipts from his sale amounted to the huge sum of \$635, which, at today's prices, would not have bought back his bed. Most of this sum was in cheques, and a few of them would bounce, but he would just forget about them.

Now how much did Mr. Duggins's life weigh? It was time to find out. He had retained one bathroom scale, as well as his postage scale, and, with much anticipation, he did a reweighing. The total was 247 pounds, 7 ounces — a vast improvement but still a long way from his goal.

It had been close to ten years since Mr. Duggins had been apartment-hunting, and only after several days of wasted effort did he realize how bad the housing situation was. When he told rental agents that he was looking for a cheap apartment, they told him there was no such thing anymore. And when he followed up on classified ads, he was shocked to see what even the smallest apartments were going for. But what jolted him even more was the realization that nobody wanted to rent to a man who was out of work, and no amount of explaining would do him any good. "I ought to just go and live in the woods!" he told himself with disgust, although he did not really mean it.

Finally, he decided to walk around the seediest neighborhoods he could think of, since the kind of place he was looking for would probably not be advertised to begin with. He even stopped winos, or people he thought were winos (one was actually the editor of a poetry magazine), and asked them where to find a cheap apartment. He was shocked to learn that many of these people slept in doorways or condemned buildings or under bridges, even in the winter. This made him feel inferior and hopelessly spoiled.

He got no leads on apartments. But one day, by a stroke of luck, he happened to pass a building that was so run-down it looked ready for the wrecker's ball, and in the front window was a crudely printed sign: *Room For Rent*.

He went inside and, after some difficulty, found the superintendent's apartment. The super was a fat slob in a grimy T-shirt, who kept three chains between himself and Mr. Duggins and spoke through the crack in the door. "Whaddya want?" he asked suspiciously, noticing Mr. Duggins's clothes, which were too good for a place like this.

"I'm interested in the room for rent. How much is it?" asked Mr. Duggins hopefully.

"Two-fifteen a month. It's unfurnished. You got a hot plate and fridge, and you share the bathroom. Gotta pay first and last month's rent in advance. Wanna see it?"

"Yes, I'd love to!"

"You an inspector or something?"

"No, no! I really need a room."

"Just a minute." The door closed, and the chain locks were undone. There was a jingle of keys. The door opened again. "Follow me. It's upstairs."

The room was the most dreadful habitation Mr. Duggins had ever seen. There were holes in the plaster that might have led to nests of rats, pipes were exposed, there were stains on the ceiling indicating leaks, the wallpaper curled out from the walls, the windows were cracked and dirty, the floor was dirty and severely warped and had an apparent bloodstain, the fridge was a museum piece, the little sink was likely a breeding trap for every form of micro-organism known to man, the wiring of the hot plate and the one unshaded lamp was frayed, the doorjamb was cracked from break-ins and/or police raids, and a peculiar fetid smell pervaded the room. The view from the window was of a backyard filled with junk.

"Not too bad, eh? Wanna see the bathroom?"

"All right."

The bathroom, which was shared with the unknown inhabitants of two other rooms on the floor, looked like a broom closet that had been converted. There was no bathtub but a shower stall with a mildew-stained curtain that looked like half of a bed sheet.

"You work?" asked the super.

"Uh, not at the moment."

"On welfare?"

"No, I'm living off my savings for a while." Mr. Duggins tried to smile.

The super gave him an unfriendly look. "I don't want no trouble with the cops. This is a decent building. You understand?"

"Yes, of course. I can assure you you have nothing to worry about."

The super scratched his belly, regarded Mr. Duggins with a mixture of puzzlement and suspicion, and then shuffled back to the room to lock the door. He came back looking just a teeny bit less unfriendly. "Well, you want it?"

"Yes, I'll take it."

"Wanna move in today?"

"Tomorrow, I think. I have a few things to pack."

"Okay, come on downstairs, and we'll do business. By the way, I forgot to mention there's a ten-dollar security deposit on the key."

It was the sixth of December when Mr. Duggins vacated his once-lovely apartment, said goodbye to Mr. Bayer, and packed his 247 pounds, 7 ounces into the back of a beaten-up truck driven by a Portuguese mover named Manny. Manny was surprised at how little Mr. Duggins had to transport. "Your furniture already went, right?" he asked.

"No. This is everything."

"This is it?" Manny looked at Mr. Duggins very strangely. He looked at him even more strangely when they reached their destination. "You moving in here?" he asked with astonishment.

"Yes."

"Tsk! Tsk! Tsk! Nice guy like you." He shook his head and got out.

Mr. Duggins tipped Manny ten dollars out of shame.

Mr. Duggins was soon settled and convinced himself he had improved his life greatly. His first meal in his new home consisted of a can of stew served on his only dinner plate, some bread, and an instant coffee.

He spent the evening looking out the window at the back of an equally dilapidated building and listening to a hockey game on his cheap transistor radio.

He found it hard to sleep that night because the toilet gurgled for a long time after every flush, one neighbor had his radio on loud late at night, and there was a party going on in the adjacent house that did not stop until the police arrived around 3 a.m. and dragged somebody away. But this was all for the best as it would teach him about life, he thought.

The heat was barely adequate, and Mr. Duggins could hear the wind whistle through his cracked windows. He sat up and reread parts of *Walden*, the only book he had held on to, and reassured himself that he was truly on the path of enlightenment. After all, the middle of the word *enlightenment* was *lighten*, and that's what he was doing with his life. Perhaps he was going about it a bit differently from Thoreau, but in spirit it was all the same.

The next day, Mr. Duggins bravely tackled his pile of clothing, which was too big for his closet. He filled two cardboard cartons with most of it and carried them, one at a time, to the Goodwill Store a few blocks away. This made him feel good because it was a charitable act. And as he looked at the shabby clientele in the store, he thought that these were the "real people" of society, and it would be a fine thing to get down to their level and become more real, too.

On the way home, he noticed the first Christmas lights of the season on some of the old houses, and this enhanced his good mood.

That evening, he ventured to meet his two neighbors on the floor, whom he had not yet seen. He knocked on the door closest to his. It was opened by an old man who was not only drunk but who couldn't speak properly because he had almost no teeth. Mr. Duggins was taken aback. "Uh, hello. I'm George Duggins," he said bravely.

"Whayawant?"

"What?"

"Whayawant?"

"Oh. I live in the next room, that's all. I just wanted to introduce myself."

The old man seemed to have a hard time focusing his eyes. "Whayawant?" he repeated, and a large snot began to descend from one nostril.

"Uh, never mind. Sorry to bother you."

The old man closed the door.

That was enough socializing for one evening, Mr. Duggins decided.

Over the next two weeks, Mr. Duggins's mood slowly declined. He continued to discard small items, while keeping a running total of his decreasing weight, and he fought off the urge to go out and buy something to increase his comfort or help the time pass more easily.

The lightening process became harder every day, for he had to reconsider every object before choosing something to be used up, thrown out, pawned, or given to Goodwill. He became increasingly fidgety, slept restlessly, and began to have headaches.

There was one cardboard box in particular that he had not yet opened because he knew it would be the most painful for him, but at last he brought it into the centre of the room — right over the bloodstain, in fact — and opened it. It was the box that contained a large number of trivial personal items — things like old letters, his high school diploma and yearbook, some of his old notebooks, a half-inch piece of eraser, photo albums, little gifts given to him over the years, a little sewing kit in an antique candy tin given to him by his mother, tie pins, souvenirs of vacations, personal documents, including a twenty-year-old letter of reference from an employer, some address labels, a letter opener imprinted with the name of his late uncle's restaurant, a memo calendar from 1973, an old address book whose pages were falling out and whose entries were long out of date, and a profusion of other objects and scraps. A polished stone he had saved from summer camp sent him into a reverie from which he did not return for an hour, and when he did, he looked at the walls around him and felt pathetic, tiny, and alone.

Outside, the first serious snow of the season was falling, and he thought suddenly of Sandra and wondered what she was doing at that moment. Did she ever stop to remember him? Probably not, he thought. No reason to. But he wondered whether some years hence he might show up at her door, well tanned and with a knapsack and perhaps even a guitar, and surprise her with his new self, and perhaps then... Mr. Duggins sighed, for it seemed next to impossible. By the time he achieved

the kind of wisdom and independence Ray had, he would probably be too old. Sandra was even more remote and unattainable than she had been at the party, he admitted to himself. And then he thought of Thoreau sitting in his cabin alone, watching the seasons change, not missing the companionship of others. Yes, that was the way to be. It was all in the mind.

Nevertheless, as Christmas approached, Mr. Duggins's sense of isolation increased. This was the time for parties and conviviality. No doubt, there'd be a party at his old company. But, of course, Mr. Duggins had lost all contact with those people. In fact, nobody at all knew where he was.

His further efforts to meet his neighbors met with complete failure. The other resident on his floor was a mentally retarded boy who was too afraid to let him in. "I only let Tom in," he said. Elsewhere in the house there were two girls who couldn't speak English, another drunk, and a lunatic who took Mr. Duggins for a former acquaintance and kept babbling about a secret tunnel under the Atlantic Ocean. And Mr. Duggins went away from one door without knocking after hearing some extremely strange sounds inside.

A week before Christmas, Mr. Duggins experienced a crisis of confidence. He came across his bank book and, realizing that he had several thousand dollars to his name, was sorely tempted to give up his new life, go back to "civilization," and start over. But as he thought about it, he saw complications and weight coming back into his life. He thought of all the things he would have to acquire. And he thought of the sense of cowardice that would dog him for the rest of his life because he hadn't the courage to carry his plan through to the end. He looked at the bank book again: \$5, 162.55! Why, he was only shamming this simplification of his life with all that money! He was a hypocrite, that's what he was! But what was he to do with that money? This was even a thornier problem than divesting himself of physical property. Mr. Duggins had been conditioned all his life to take money very seriously. His bank account could not be thrown out like a stack of newspapers. Its weight was of a more abstract quality. Should he withdraw it all and go on a spending spree? No, out of the question. Should he give it away? That might arouse suspicion, and he couldn't think of anyone to give it to

anyway. Parcelling it out among various charities was a possibility. But this was his last remaining security, and he was not yet ready to kiss it goodbye. So he decided to do nothing for the moment. It wasn't that urgent a matter, he reminded himself. He might get some ideas later.

Mr. Duggins's total weight was now under a hundred pounds, but the discarding process was causing him more and more psychic pain, as he had been saving for last those things to which he was most attached. Finally, it struck him that he was going about it the wrong way. Instead of examining each item to determine what could be thrown out, he realized that he ought to pack a knapsack as if for a trip, putting in as much as he could that he thought was essential, and then dispose of everything else.

Thus inspired, he went out and bought a knapsack — a durable nylon one that promised to withstand any number of summers in southern France jaunting through flowery meadows.

He was up late that night stuffing his knapsack to the brim, packing and unpacking several times in indecision. When he was satisfied, he then put on as much clothing as could be worn comfortably at one time. This was it — the final goal. He packed everything else in boxes and carried them downstairs and out to the curb for the garbage men to pick up the next morning. Then he returned to his room, took off the extra clothing, lay down on his thin foam cushion (the frame of the cot had already gone to Goodwill), and tried to sleep. But he could not. He merely lay there, unmoving, and after a little while he began to cry softly, thinking of all the little things of his life — things that gave his insignificant life what little sense of identity it had — that would be picked up with everyone else's garbage tomorrow and be lost forever. But Mr. Duggins was stern with himself at last and reminded himself that this was a necessary sacrifice for the cause of simplification and he would one day be glad of it.

There was a lot of noise on the lower floor that night, and Mr. Duggins hardly slept a wink. He hated the room he was in and saw it for the dismal hovel it really was. Would Ray have consented to live in such a dump? Certainly not. For Mr. Duggins, therefore, the next step was obvious.

The next morning, Mr. Duggins made one last instant coffee, put on all his clothing, and bade farewell to his room. As a gift to the next tenant, he left behind his chair, his little plastic table, his foam cushion, and his copy of *Walden*. The bathroom

scale, which he had donated to the common bathroom the previous day, had already disappeared mysteriously. He put his knapsack over his shoulder, with his rolled-up bed sheet tucked under the straps and went downstairs to the super's apartment.

"I'm leaving," he said, handing over the key.

The super was surprised. "You already paid two months rent."

"I know."

"Well, I can't give any of it back," he said, ready for an argument.

"That's okay. It doesn't matter. Well, goodbye," said Mr. Duggins, shaking the super's dirty hand.

And with that, he carried his simplified existence out to the street and headed north and east.

During that walk, Mr. Duggins experienced the excitement of seeing the familiar with new eyes. The shabby streets, wet with slush, and the grey sky seemed marvellous, amazing, fascinating, full of the unknown. Had he ever really looked at anything before? Had he ever seen his surroundings as they really were? A chimney, a fence, an old car parked in an alley did something to his brain that it had never felt — at least, not since early childhood. Yes, even his cold feet and stiff shoulders made him feel more alive, and he knew that discomfort was just a state of mind anyway. He imagined himself becoming leaner and stronger as time passed, soaking up raw experience like a sponge, until he would one day look — and sound — as impressive as Ray.

He walked for two hours, until he was ravenous, and then headed into the nearest greasy spoon and ate a large meal. Then, feeling temporarily revitalized, he headed back out into the cold.

His plan was to get beyond the main part of the city and hit the ravine that ran many miles inland from the lake and cut through the undeveloped suburbs. There he would find a remote wooded spot, make a lean-to shelter with his sheet, and see how long he could hold out. After that, perhaps he would travel east, or perhaps west. It didn't matter. He knew it would be a severe test, and perhaps even dangerous, but he told himself that if it got too bad, he'd give it up and come back. Thoreau's sojourn at Walden Pond had been an experiment. This would be George Duggins's experiment.

It was nearly sundown by the time Mr. Duggins reached

the ravine. It felt strange yet exciting to step off the paved road and down the embankment to the frozen stream that boastfully called itself a river. Now the going got slower, for it was no simple task to follow a river along its banks. And Mr. Duggins dared not walk on the ice because it might not support him.

As he made slow but steady progress away from the warmth and comfort of the city, the number of Christmas lights that could be glimpsed on the houses set on higher ground gradually diminished until at last there were no more to be seen. Perhaps Mr. Duggins's perseverance was being rewarded by the Fates, for the sky cleared, and a full moon shone down upon him to allow him to continue his ungainly trek toward freedom long after sundown. Or perhaps it was their way of putting him farther away from the nearest neighbor. At any rate, it was around 9 p.m. when he decided at last to find a cozy little nook among the trees and bushes, make a screen against the wind with his bed sheet, and start a little fire with some twigs and the butane lighter in his sack.

It was soon evident that his plans for a night out of doors were not going to go well. In the first place, once he had stopped walking he began to feel much colder. His feet and hands suffered the most, and when he sat down he reduced the circulation in his rear end. Second, his bed sheet was laughably ineffective. Two corners were held down by rocks, and the other two were twisted clumsily around a branch. Lighting a fire was a lot harder than it looked on television, and Mr. Duggins had absolutely no experience with such things. After numerous pathetic attempts, he managed to set fire to a small branch torn off a tree, but the fire required almost constant attention. It would be hopeless to even attempt to heat a can of soup. Mr. Duggins got his little metal pot out of his sack, put in a tea bag and some chunks of snow, and attempted to make a cup of hot tea. The result was a cup of cold, slightly tea-flavored water, and he had forgotten about sugar. When he got up to relieve himself, he had to pull down his pants, and this made him very cold indeed, and by the time he returned, the fire was out and had to be relit.

Mr. Duggins cursed himself for his ineptitude, as well as his inadequate preparations, but reasoned that he would learn these mundane things by experience, and hadn't the human race, most of which had never even finished high school, managed to cope with these things and worse through the centuries? What was it

that Ray had said? You had to literally throw yourself into the unknown.

From where Mr. Duggins sat, he could see the face of the full moon behind the top of a tree, and as he stared at it, he thought he could see the disk move visibly behind the network of branches. He wondered if one could tell time by the movement of the moon's disk across a fixed point. He had no idea what time it was because he no longer wore a watch. If he stayed awake, time would pass very slowly. If he could manage to sleep, it would pass more quickly.

As cold as he was, Mr. Duggins wanted to see the night through — at least this one night, for the sake of his pride. He lay down on the bare, frozen ground, curled into a fetal position, drew up his coat collar, pulled down his little woollen cap, and tried to learn something from the wind. He listened and listened and thought and thought, and although inklings of ideas fluttered into his mind for brief seconds, he was too cold to concentrate on them. Perhaps he would learn something from the wind on another occasion.

Mr. Duggins shut his eyes and tried to sleep, but by now he was shivering. His little fire was next to useless, for the wind blew the heat away from him so that he had to give up on it. He concentrated on conserving his body heat. His toes had gone senseless long ago, and his head was getting colder despite his cap.

As he lay there shivering, he wondered whether perhaps he might have misunderstood what he had read in *Walden*, but as he no longer had his copy (it weighed an unnecessary four ounces), he could not consult it again. For a moment, he thought of giving it all up, of walking back to the nearest road, hitching a ride or hailing a cab, and getting to someplace warm. But he realized that he hadn't enough cash for a hotel, and he couldn't bear to complicate the life of some former friend or acquaintance by appearing on his doorstep in the middle of the night. Besides, that would be an admission of failure. And so he thought the warmest thoughts he could think to take his mind off the cold. He thought of that evening at Sandra's and how much he had admired her, and he imagined that the evening had turned out very differently. He imagined that he was the last guest remaining, and that Ray had put on his pack and left, and that he and Sandra then went to bed and made love and discovered that they

were soulmates who understood each other perfectly. She would tell him things that she had never told another man, and he would tell her things that he had never told another woman. He imagined that he was in her bed right now, all warm and toasty.

Under the cloudless winter sky, the night-time temperature dropped rapidly, and Mr. Duggins's body continued to lose heat. His fantasies became disjointed and psychotic. His shivering ceased, and he experienced a temporary feeling of warmth in his feet. But this warmth passed away, and he began to sink deeper and deeper into drowsiness. He had the vague thought that he was freezing but no longer had the will to move. He no longer cared what happened. The only thought he could retain in his mind was the face of Sandra, a disembodied face floating in a frozen space against a backdrop of cobalt blue. The face looked at him, and its lips moved, but there was no voice — only an incomprehensible sound like that of the wind whistling through branches. Then, at last, the face faded away, and so did the sound, and there was nothing.

The Star, March 2nd

Man Found Frozen to Death

The body of a man found frozen to death near the Don River yesterday has been identified as George Duggins, 40, of no fixed address. Police were called to the scene after two boys discovered the body among some bushes while hiking. Preliminary evidence indicates that Duggins froze to death, but police were unable to say how long his body might have been there. A spokesman said there was no evidence of foul play but an autopsy would be performed. Duggins's bank book, showing savings of over five thousand dollars, was found in his knapsack, and police are baffled as to why he was attempting to live out of doors.

Rainy Night

It was around nine o'clock on a Sunday night that my phone rang. I expected it to be my grandmother. Instead, I was jolted to hear the voice of my ex-girlfriend Kit, whom I hadn't heard from for nearly two years. "I need to ask a big favor of you," she said with a slightly quavering voice. "My car's not running and I need some help." No preliminaries. No how-are-you or how's-it-going. "It's a last-minute thing. There's nobody else around," she added.

"Okay, sure. What's the matter?"

"I have to clear Zoltan's things out of a room he was living in. It has to be done tonight, and I need somebody with a car."

After a moment of reflection I said, "Well, it appears I'm finally good for something."

"Look, it was hard enough for me to call you. You don't have to rake me over the coals." I was silent. "I can't call a taxi," she went on. "You know how these things can be."

"All right, I'll come over."

"Do you have a couple of cardboard cartons?"

"Yeah, I think so"

"Bring them, just in case."

"Okay...well...so I'll be right over. I'll leave now."

"I'll be waiting. Just honk."

Just honk. Meaning don't come inside. That's all over with.

Zoltan was Kit's husband — legally, at least. For the past five or six years he'd been a patient at the psychiatric hospital at W——. He was a manic-depressive and considered incurable. The heavy doses of drugs they pumped into him made him more or less manageable, but he still went through his phases. He had "eloped" on numerous occasions during his more extreme highs. He just walked out the door. W—— is not a very secure institution. It doesn't have to be. Its patients are not considered dangerous.

Zoltan's impromptu sprees might last anywhere from a few hours to several weeks, and he might end up anywhere. He had once made it as far as Philadelphia in a stolen car. In the trunk of the car they found all sorts of scrap metal and wood, as if he'd stopped off at a junkyard or picked up refuse or debris strewn along the road. On another occasion he showed up at the front door of an old schoolmate at three in the morning, still dressed in his hospital robe. And one time he even went to a chemical company and applied for a job. (He had been a chemical engineer.)

But most of the time Zoltan would just go home, break in, and pace around the apartment, throwing things and shouting semi-coherent complaints and demands at Kit. She would sit up with him for hours until he calmed down. There was nothing else she could do. It was pretty horrible for her. Then the police would come and take him away — ever so gently. The Toronto police had encountered him so often that he was familiar to them. They always took control of the situation in a calm, professional manner. Kit always said so. Same thing in most of the municipalities between Toronto and W——. However, if he happened to venture much farther, where he wasn't known, he was likely to be handled pretty roughly. The Philadelphia police had handcuffed him, and Kit swore they'd beaten him as well.

It was a strange feeling to drive down Kit's street again. I never thought I would. In fact, I'd sworn I never would. It looked the same. And Kit, too, looked much the same as when I'd last seen her. Even her expression was the same — that somber, intense look that suggested a veritable ocean of feeling under rigid control.

"Thanks," she said, getting into the car. I waited for her to say something else. I watched her grope for the loose ends of the seatbelts as though she'd never been in my car before.

"How've you been?" I asked.

"Okay. And you?"

"Okay." I wanted to reach over and touch her, but I was afraid to. I thought I might do it later, depending on how things went. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"It's on Avenue Road, just above St. Clair."

On the way I got what little information I could out of her. Apparently, Zoltan had rented a furnished room. Where he'd gotten the money, nobody knew. He'd lived there almost a month. Then one night when he felt high, he went into a milk store and caused a bit of a scene. The police came by and recognized him and took him straight back to W——. The hospital officials found a rent receipt in his pocket and called both the landlady and Kit.

"You spoke to the landlady?" I asked.

"Yes. She wanted me to clear the place out tonight."

"Was she angry?"

"No."

"Did she say if there was any...*problem?*"

"She didn't say."

The rest of the conversation must have been pretty banal because I have forgotten it. We just talked to avoid an awkward silence. I didn't listen too carefully to what she said. I was mostly inside of myself, feeling very sad. I knew I shouldn't lead myself on with false hopes.

We arrived at last at a large, beautiful old house, whose windows gave off the subtlest light. (This house no longer stands. An apartment building has taken its place.)

I drove slowly along a long, narrow driveway to the back, the sound of crisp autumn leaves beneath us. We parked between two other cars. We each took one of my cardboard cartons.

Kit led the way to the side door of the house. I wanted to hold her arm because it was so dark, but she was a full stride ahead of me. The side door was opened by a middle-aged lady with grey hair. I didn't really get a good look at her in the dim light of the entrance. She just seemed like an old-fashioned European lady. She smiled politely, invited us in, and led us down a little hallway. The house seemed tomb-like in its silence. I used to have dreams about houses like that when I was little. There were always closed doors that threatened to open to reveal the unspeakable.

"In here," she said, indicating Zoltan's room. "I'll leave you now." Then she went away.

It was a very nice room. The furniture was old and well-polished. It looked not just comfortable but comforting as well. Even the innocuous little oil paintings and the rather feminine lamps gave the room a feeling of stability and security. I could have lived in such a room myself. The only thing I didn't care for was the powerful smell of air freshener. Somebody had really overdone it.

A suitcase peeked out from under the bed. Some clothing was draped over a chair. A pile of laundry could be seen in the closet, along with an overcoat. A few personal effects lay upon the dresser.

"Just shove as much of the clothing as you can into the suitcase," said Kit. "Start with the closet."

As I did so, I heard the opening and closing of drawers behind my back. There was a clink of glass. After several clinks I turned to find Kit placing what looked like a pickle jar into one of the cardboard cartons. "What's that stuff?" I asked.

"Please don't look, okay?" She closed the top of the carton.

"What do you mean?"

"Just let me take care of it. It's none of your business."

I felt hurt and annoyed by her tone, but also alarmed. "Okay, suit yourself." I continued stuffing the suitcase. When I turned around again, Kit was trying to lift the carton, which appeared too laden to hold together. "That's going to break," I said.

"I can manage."

"The bottom's going to fall out, for chrissake! What the hell have you got in there?"

"Please! I just want to dump this in a trash can."

Now thoroughly piqued, I grabbed the carton and wrestled it away from her. "Look, you dragged me out here, and I'm going to see what's what! If Zoltan committed some crime, I have a right to know!" I put the carton down, opened the flaps and looked. There were jars of various sizes — mostly pickle jars. I picked one up.

Kit sighed and covered her face with her hand. "Go ahead, look. What's the difference? I only wanted to spare you some unpleasantness."

At first I wasn't sure of what I was looking at. But when I

held the jar up to the light the realization hit me. "Jesus Christ!" I gasped. The jar contained excrement floating in what could have been either water or urine. I picked up another one. The excrement was very soft and loose, making a sort of brown sludge.

"You don't have to look at all of them!" said Kit angrily, taking the jar from me and replacing it in the carton. "Look, just take this out to a trash can and dump it! And don't break any, for God's sake!"

I was about to suggest something else, but I realized it wouldn't be sensible. Kit seemed to know what to do. I figured that it had happened before, but I didn't have the nerve to ask. Anyway, not at that moment.

The carton was unwieldy. I had to hold the bottom firmly to make sure it didn't break through. As I went out the side door I saw that it had begun to rain — one of those autumn rains that make the leaves smell sour.

I went out to the sidewalk and headed south toward St. Clair. I was grateful that there was nobody else around because I must have looked a little strange carrying this heavy carton that clinked with every step I took. If the bottom had fallen out and spilled a month's worth of Zoltan's excretions all over the sidewalk, I don't know what I would have done. The rain intensified, soaking my uncovered head and giving me a chill.

As I approached the corner I was relieved to see a blue trash receptacle. Then I saw that a lady was standing in the bus shelter a few feet away. What was I to do, start unloading the jars with her watching? I stood there for a few seconds, undecided. She was looking at me. Suppose she thought I was carrying off some stolen property? Not knowing what else to do, I crossed the street when the light changed. I looked for another receptacle, but I couldn't see one in any direction.

Standing in front of the Bank of Nova Scotia at Avenue Road and St. Clair, with a driving rain soaking me and my arms ready to fall off from lugging a cargo of pee and shit, the utter ludicrousness of the situation struck me all at once. I thought surely I was experiencing an unusually vivid daydream as I sat home in my living room, smoking my pipe, looking out the window at the rain, and listening to Varese or Bartok.

Normality is an illusion just waiting to be shattered. One moment you are sitting at home spending Sunday night as you

always do. Then comes a phone call, and as a result you find yourself thrust into, shall we say, another world. Although physically in the same world as the drivers who went by me, casting brief, quizzical looks at me, in truth I was in another reality altogether. Those bland faces could never have imagined the secret drama that had taken hold of me. And I, in turn, could never have known if one among them were caught up in a circumstance as painfully absurd as my own.

A despair began to invade me. Kit must already be wondering where I was. I couldn't very well just set off down the street not knowing how far I'd have to go. For a moment I considered just hiding the carton in some dark spot, but I knew I would feel guilty about causing a shock to whoever found it. Besides, Kit had said specifically what to do.

At that moment the lady's bus arrived. When the light changed, I headed back to that corner and the receptacle. No one else was around. The slot was too narrow for the jars to fit through, so I lifted the entire lid back. Had the inner basket already been full, I would have been in trouble. Fortunately, it was almost empty. I removed a couple of newspapers from the bottom, then carefully transferred the jars. When this was done, I covered them over with a few sheets of newspapers. When I put the lid back down, I noticed the words on the slot: "*Ricky Receptacle Says Thank You.*"

When I got back to the house, Kit was at the side entrance. "What took you so long?" she asked with alarm.

"Sorry. Somebody was standing by the waste basket and I had to wait for them to leave."

"Why?"

"*Why?* I didn't want to look suspicious, that's why."

"Oh, hell, you think anybody pays attention these days?"

"Well, you don't have to snap at me, for chrissake." I followed her back inside.

"There's one more carton. I'll put the rest of the things in the car."

The second carton was just as heavy as the first. As I took it out, I thought, *Oh, Zoltan, you poor, crazy bastard, why couldn't you have collected buttons or string or lint or bus transfers? Whatever possessed you, Zoltan?* I had never met the man, but my heart went out to him.

When I returned, Kit was in the doorway with the old lady.

The old lady asked her, "Are you sure you have everything?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Thank you. Good night."

The old lady closed the door.

Kit and I got into the car. I started the engine. I was so cold I was shaking. All my clothing was drenched. "Put on the heater," she said.

"It's not warm enough yet."

I sat staring at the wooden fence, everything inside me coming undone. My mind was full of the beating of the rain, the sour smell of leaves, the wetness of my clothes, the ache in my arms, the image of myself hauling about thirty jars full of a crazy man's excrement...and Kit sitting beside me. Suddenly, she reached over and held my hand and said, "Thank you," and her touch was so warm that I felt electrified, just as I did the very first time she touched me. I could only nod my head to acknowledge her thanks, for any words would have caught in my throat. I couldn't bear to cry in front of her again.

I finally turned the car around, and we drove slowly down the driveway. It seemed to me that a curtain parted in one of the front windows and the old lady was watching us. Did she know what we had taken out of her house? What did we look like from her vantage point — this couple now leaving her driveway, the woman at least ten years older than the man? What did she think of us? We would henceforth be a mystery to each other.

I stopped at the curb to let the heater heat up, the fog on the windshield yielding grudgingly to the not-yet-warm air. The touch of Kit's hand was fading from me as I realized what must happen next. I believe we both realized. We would drive back to Kit's. I would want her to ask me inside, but she wouldn't. One of us would have to be the first to say it, but either way it could only end sadly. We would say goodbye, and surely this time it would be forever. We would be relegated once again to the limbo of each other's past tense. What an awful, miserable moment for us both — as inevitable as death itself. Oh, Humanity! Why must we suffer?

As the sound of the rain and the wipers filled my ears, I wished that I could somehow melt away in the rain and be washed into the sewers, washed away into oblivion as simple atoms that could not feel pain! Would that there were such a

Mercy looking over us! I would have paid any price to have some miracle of Fate spare me that moment that lay ahead. I would gladly have changed places with anyone else for a little while, even the lowliest being on earth. I would even have been far away, tucked safely into a hospital bed, dreaming the blissful dreams of a lunatic.

Wooden Sticks With Points

When I was a boy in the Bronx, there was a pleasant park I used to play in. I remember that the grass was well-manicured and that there was a little pond with a fountain in the middle. The cement base of the fountain and the rim of the pond were white, and the grass was a lovely green. And all day long, men with wooden sticks with metal points at one end would walk around spearing litter. I don't recall that there was much litter to be seen, so those men must have gone after the most insignificant little scraps to keep themselves busy. And there was a nice little candy store called Jack's, where my mother would take me for an ice cream soda.

Now that park is a lot surrounded by a chain link fence. There is not one blade of grass, and the ground is literally covered (every square inch) with broken bottles, beer cans, and other junk. And across the street, the Puerto Ricans sit on the curb or lean out of their cars and drink beer and whiskey and play their radios very loud. The music is very ugly and stupid. Loud music also emanates from the windows of the apartment buildings all around. All this noise and ugliness. I can only shake my head and perhaps, if no one is watching, shed a tear. It is as if no one remembers. These drunken no-goods never lived here then, and most of them would be too young to remember anyway. To the

young, what exists now is normal. Jack's is gone, too. You don't find many nice stores like Jack's any more.

And now I work in a factory in another part of the city. It is a wood factory in which all sorts of wooden products are made. Among our products are those wooden sticks with points used for spearing litter. But I am sorry to say it is a product that no longer sells. We have a half-dozen very nice wooden sticks with points leaning in a dark corner, but no one seems to want them. I suppose that all over the country men have stopped spearing litter, and lovely, old parks have decayed into lifeless horrors to torment the hearts of those of us who still remember.

Every coffee break and lunch hour, I go and sit by myself in that dark corner where the wooden sticks are. I sit on a crate and just look at those sticks and wonder how they feel leaning there, all lathed and polished and nowhere to go. I have named them. Their names are Edward, Eugene, Everett, Elliot, Eric, and Emerson. They are all very fine boys that want very much to go out into the world, either as a group or separately, and help stop lovely, old parks from turning into garbage heaps. I'm sure my co-workers think I'm a very strange, old bird to sit in this corner by myself. "He likes to be alone," they say. But I'm not alone. I'm just choosy about the company I keep. I don't talk to anyone about the wooden sticks. These days it's very hard to discuss your feelings with other people. People have a way of nodding and saying "Yes, yes" and "Of course" in the most understanding manner, but you know they don't understand at all. An old man soon learns to shut up.

I found my old Latin exercise book from high school, and I am writing this in the back, where there are a few blank pages left. I was a very good student of Latin in my day. It is a very beautiful language — classical and elegant and orderly — and you should read it in a lovely park with a fountain, if you can still find one, and remember that the world is very old and has not gained as much as it has lost.

I never thought much about the men themselves who used those sticks in the park, but as they were much older than me, they have doubtless already died. Today they would be anachronisms in their trade, as I am in spirit.

I believe that when I get close to death, I should like to lie down in a Parks Department shed with the wooden sticks that are no longer used. No one would discover me until I had died and

begun to decompose, and perhaps not even then. And my last thoughts would be of green grass, and white cement, and a fountain, and my Latin exercises, and ice cream sodas at Jack's, and men keeping the park so very neat with their wooden sticks with points.

My Work As A Hole

When the world said no to my work for the thousandth time, I marked it as my personal millenium. I could have persisted but chose not to. I gathered all the work of my life and put it into a cardboard box. A compact life's work it was — not too heavy to lift.

I carried my box downstairs and out into the street, where the world was busy with important things. This, like other garbage, should be left at the curb. But no, I had in mind a more fitting goodbye. I walked out into the intersection and amid honking horns hurled the box down, scattering pages of self-incrimination and desperation under the wheels of cars. This, my miraculous poison!

Good! for the trucks and cars running over it. Good! for these looks of disgust and surprise from strangers. Good! for these energies spreading first north-south, then east-west. Would that they reached around the world.

I thought at first my eyes deceived me, but a hole had opened in the street where I had thrown my work down! It grew larger as I watched, not caving in but actually enlarging. There was a whooshing noise as one hears when the train goes into the tunnel, and, as people and vehicles stopped as if frozen, all the noises of the world — people, traffic, machines, and all civilized noises — seemed to come loose from their sources and be sucked into the hole. WHOOSH! The world had lost its voice!

And as the hole enlarged, the cars that had stopped short of it fell in and disappeared, and pedestrians, and light poles, and litter baskets, and parking meters, and the nut vendor with his many varieties of nuts and candy apples — all followed as readily as one could wish.

And now, although I felt no wind, objects were lifted up and sucked into the hole — trash from all around, newsstands, fire hydrants, mail boxes, traffic lights, store signs, theater marquees, babies in their carriages, cripples in their wheelchairs, dogs on their leashes, the man with no legs and his 25-cent pens, the contents of a discount store (*Out of Business! Everything Must Go!*). They all went without complaint, all things familiar and civilized.

And charter buses full of tourists seeking amazement and the visiting team from Dordt College, and policemen, students, the gainfully employed and the gainlessly unemployed, readers from the Christian Science Reading Room, Greeks at their grills and their greasy hamburgers, the Civil Liberties Union, the library and all its books, the supermarket and all its goods, things flying out of windows all around, flying directly to the ever-widening hole. Laundry from washers and driers in the laundromat, and candles, pews and icons from churches, and startled clergymen, and judges, assemblymen, scholars, and experts of all fields, and Howard's Driving School with Howard himself giving instructions, and all things moral and efficient.

How deep must this hole be to receive these things? I did not dare approach the edge but kept safely away, for in my heart I knew it was bottomless. The hole seemed to loot the streets by magnetism — Perlman's Monuments, Pink Poodle Grooming (*The Royal Service For Loyal Dogs*), Wong's Kung-Fu Society, Ed's Art Mart, Jokeland, the Royal Trust Company, the Hindustan Travel Service, Mr. Pizza, Mr. Pest Control, Mr. Calculator, Mr. Submarine, Mr. Jeans, Mr. Tie, Mr. Sportsman, Mr. Muffler, Mr. Meat Pie, Mr. Broadloom, Mr. Chicken, Mr. Insulation, Mr. Transmission, Mr. Natural Hair Replacement, Mr. Orthopedic Support Systems, Mr. Prosthetic Devices, Mr. Plumbing and Bath Fixtures, the Messrs. Casual, Convenience, and Fitness, and firms with fifty and a hundred and two hundred years of service, and all things permanent and civilized.

And propositions, pick-ups, big deals, murders, robberies, and accidents were suspended as their participants were lifted bodily, along with gangs, junkies, religious loonies, civil servants, skin specialists and their itchy patients, notaries, gas jockeys, an entire funeral procession, cabs, ambulances, an army surplus store complete with gas masks and parkas in preparation for the Inevitable, innumerable official hockey sticks, pinball machines, all the garments of the garment center, billboards with their sparkling teeth and unstoppable snow tires, the cut-rate bakery and all its stale buns, and unwarned residents from apartment buildings all around, and civilized people with straight-up track records and spotless credit ratings — all translated through the air as innocent as falling birds.

And now all the buildings seemed to deflate like balloons, and the hiss was but a gentle breeze across my face as structures clear to the horizon shrank to nothing and sent their weightless pieces streaming into the crater. Even the pavement and the foundations of buildings, and water mains, electrical systems, phone lines, gas lines, and sewers removed themselves until the earth was denuded and simple rock and dirt showed themselves to the sun for the first time since civilization.

And all things rational, and all things conceptual — love, hate, logic, faith, philosophy, good and evil and all other abstractions — were removed from the world until I realized I was alone. My clothes already gone, I stood naked and amazed upon a new and peaceful earth. I could feel my intelligence leaving me, my will, my memory, my desires, and finally even my language, transpiring from my body like a gaseous blood. I had become utterly simple and had nothing left to me but a feeling of relief that at last there was nothing more I had to say.

About the Author

Crad Kilodney was born in Jamaica, New York, in 1948 and grew up on Long Island. He earned a degree in astronomy from the University of Michigan in 1968, worked briefly in a planetarium, and quit, never to return to his chosen field, thereby achieving the rare distinction of absolute vocational failure before the age of 21.

In 1973 he moved to Toronto. In 1978 he began publishing his own little books and selling them on the street, and he has been so occupied ever since. He is very likely the only writer in the world who does this as his sole occupation.

Crad Kilodney
Girl on the Subway

Crad Kilodney is a disturber of the peace. For over 10 years, he has been standing on Toronto streetcorners and selling copies of his darkly original fictions. In 1989 (not long after Black Moss released *Malignant Humors*), he sent shock waves through the CBC establishment, when all 6 of the stories he submitted to their competition (under pseudonyms) – by such well-known authors as Kafka, Faulkner, and O. Henry – were given form rejections by the selection committee. Most recently, he circulated (again under a pseudonym) a collection of poetry by Irving Layton, which was turned down by almost every publishing house he sent it to (including Layton's own publisher).

Girl on the Subway, Kilodney's most recent collection, contains 11 of his "serious" stories (including the title story, which was also screened out of the CBC literary competition).

These are dangerous pieces of fiction, expertly crafted. Kilodney's view from the edge. Don't drop them. They're likely to explode.



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